

WWII

HOLOCAUST ON WHEELS: HITLER'S SECRET DEATH VANS FOLLOWED THE INVASION EAST

Bringing History to Life

Tank battle at Kursk

Two million soldiers clashed in bloody armoured showdown

Hitler wanted Stalin's oil

Nazi war machine needed millions of barrels to conquer the world

Battle of Stalingrad

330,000 men were sacrificed out of duty

EASTERN FRONT

**WORLD WAR II'S
BLOODIEST COMBAT ZONE**



NEXT STOP BERLIN: RAG-TAG ARMY STOOD IN STALIN'S WAY





BLOOD ON THE EASTERN FRONT

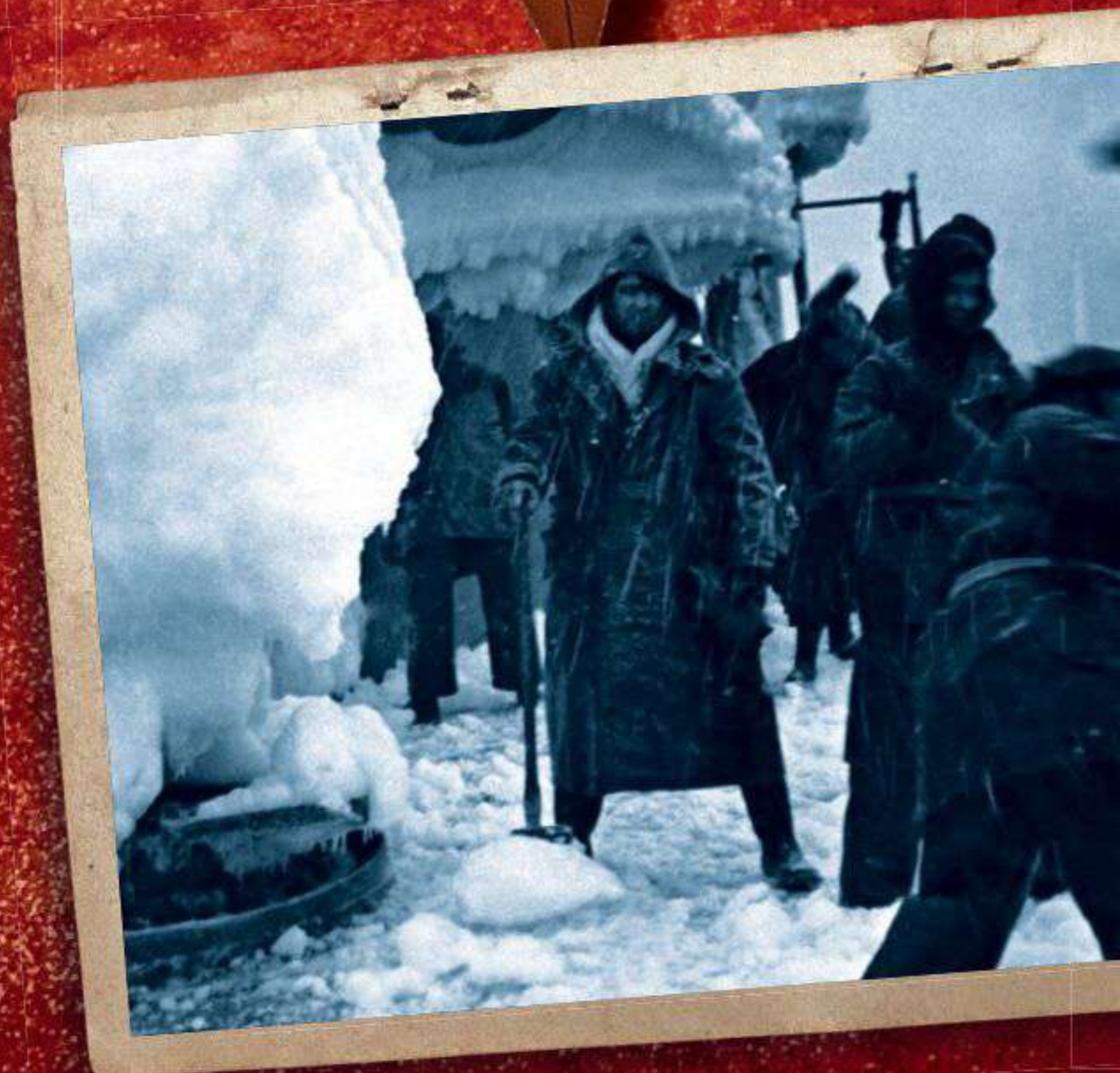
In June 1941, more than three million Axis troops poured into the Soviet Union as part of the biggest offensive in history. Within a few months the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, was in the Wehrmacht's sights. Hitler wanted the city, and the fighting turned bloody. The Red Army lost over six times as many men as the Germans, with the added loss of tanks, weapons and ammunition.

For Soviet civilians, Operation Barbarossa was a disaster: town after town was burned, while SS squads specialising in mass extermination followed in the soldiers' wake, several equipped with death vans capable of gassing up to 90 people in 15 minutes.

The story of the war on the Eastern Front is chilling – neither side showed any mercy to the other, and those living in the western part of the Soviet Union were subjected to horrific atrocities. Read on to understand the whole gruesome story...

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VIOLENT FIGHTING SET

KIEV ON

When Hitler saw a chance to surround over half a million Soviet soldiers stationed in and around Ukraine's capital Kiev, he ordered an attack against his generals' advice, but the decision would cost Germany dearly.

UKRAINE/1941



In the summer of 1941, over three million Axis soldiers cross the Soviet Union's borders in the largest offensive in history. The attack goes well for the Nazis, and within a few months, the German armed forces have Ukraine's capital, Kiev, in sight. Hitler wants to take the city, and his troops prepare a giant pincer manoeuvre.



FIRE

First, the Germans bombed Kiev, then after the surrender, the Soviets set off mines in all of the city's central buildings.

THE 22ND SEPTEMBER 1941 WOULD NEVER END. At least, that's how Erich Hager felt. As a soldier in the German 17th Panzer Division, he was participating in the Wehrmacht's large-scale advance towards the city of Kiev in the Soviet republic of Ukraine. The Nazis had made ground, but Soviet tanks were attacking. The Germans pushed forward again, but the losses were great. All around Hager, his comrades were falling to the ground, bleeding and dying. Hager knew he couldn't expect help.

The Germans' lines of defence were thin – too thin – and the enemy's tanks broke through. Like a fiery monster of iron and steel, a 52-tonne vehicle ploughed towards Hager. He glanced around, then ran. Gasping, with sweat running down his face, he continued until he reached a village. There he found eight comrades. All were unharmed, but totally exhausted.

Hager's experience was not unusual for the soldiers in the Battle of Kiev. The city offered a strategic location that would

give the Germans access to both large coal deposits and rich oil fields in the Caucasus. But the invasion was far from easy. Not only did the Soviet soldiers put up a tougher resistance than the Germans had expected, but the flat, desolate plains and the capricious climate were foes in themselves. The road to Kiev was long and full of dangers. The city was Hitler's and his generals' first serious challenge on the Eastern Front.

Three months earlier, the operation on the Eastern Front had seemed easy and straightforward. After subjugating most of Western Europe using blitzkrieg tactics, Hitler threw his might at the Soviet Union. Stalin's great empire had oil, grain and other necessities required by Germany's industry and citizens. Most importantly, it boasted vast, uninhabited regions that would be an ideal place for Germans to settle in the Nazi new world order that Hitler wanted to usher in after the war.

On 22nd June 1941, Germany invaded Poland, Finland and Romania with no fewer than 3.7 million troops along a 2,900-kilometre front. The Germans hadn't taken any winter equipment with them, because Hitler believed the war would



*Von Kleist's men
wore the letter
K, Guderian's
wore G.*



*The villages east of Kiev were
cleared of tanks and guns before
German infantrymen advanced
on their way to the city.*

be short. Not only did he regard Soviet soldiers as racially inferior to the Germans, but he was also convinced that the Communist system was unstable.

"You have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down," the Führer had claimed.

GREAT DISTANCES EXHAUSTED SOLDIERS

At the beginning of the invasion, everything had indicated that Hitler was correct. In just one week, German troops had advanced more than 320 kilometres into the country. At the same time, Nazi forces destroyed almost 4,000 planes and killed, wounded or captured 600,000 Soviet soldiers. The invading troops were divided into three army groups – North, Centre and South – with the immediate goal of occupying Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev, respectively.

While Army Groups North and Centre advanced rapidly, Army Group South, under Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, soon encountered problems on the road to Kiev.

On 26th June, Major Karl Thilo, High Command officer with responsibility for Army Group South reported that "Army has gained only very little ground. Heavy casualties on both sides ... Russians are standing their ground excellently".

The landscape itself was a hindrance. To get to Kiev, the soldiers had to drive or march across the flat desolate plains of western Ukraine for days.

"I sat in my truck, looking out over the tranquil landscape, trying desperately to fight down an irrational anxiety. I hardly knew myself. ... [W]ith this vast expanse of country, I found myself gripped by depression – by a sense of utter desolation and fear – the fear of being trapped," said officer Erich Kern.

The conditions, which were alternately dry and dusty or rainy and muddy, contributed to the difficulties.

"The road, if this species of cattle-track may be so described, is covered with a thick layer of fine dust, which with every breath of wind rises in dense red clouds.

But in places, where the clayey soil has failed to absorb the rainwater, or where a stream crosses the track, the sticky, tenacious mud grips the wheels of the lorries and the tracks of the tanks, which sink slowly," wrote Curzio Malaparte, an Italian journalist who accompanied Army Group South.

STALIN LINE BLOCKED ROUTE

The landscape and mud were not the only challenges. On the route east, German patrols were suddenly and without warning attacked from seemingly innocent-looking farmhouses along the road. The first columns that were shelled believed that the fire came from the Red Army's rear guard, on the run from advancing Germans.

Soon, however, it dawned on the Nazis that they hadn't encountered enemies on the run. On the contrary, they had run straight into the Stalin Line, the Soviet Union's defence in the west.

The facility was built in the 1920s as a defence against attacks from the capitalist West and stretched all the way along the USSR's western border. The line of defence consisted of bunkers and trench-like concrete ditches, from which soldiers could shell invading forces. After the German invasion in June 1941, the line was repaired and provided with



EWALD VON KLEIST

NAME

FIELD MARSHAL

Officer died in prison camp

Cavalry officer Paul Ludwig Ewald von Kleist had retired when he was recalled to active service in 1939 at the age of 58. Von Kleist was promoted to field marshal in 1943, but was stripped of his title in 1944 for opposing Hitler's orders not to withdraw his troops. In 1945, von Kleist was captured by US forces, put on trial by court martial and sent to a Soviet prison camp.



- > **Convicted of war crimes.**
- > **Could trace his lineage back to the 13th century.**

new weapons. Attacks from the Stalin Line delayed the advance, and Kiev's defence needed to be at least as effective. Here, commissar Nikita Khrushchev, a liaison between Stalin and the Ukrainian military, had expelled 160,000 civilians.

The result was an impressive 28-kilometre-long defensive zone of anti-tank trenches as well as 750 brand new concrete or wooden bunkers reinforced with rows of barbed wire. Together with the Soviet forces, the civil defences formed a seemingly impenetrable wall around Kiev. When German forces withdrew on 8th August after four days of fruitless attempts to cross the River Dnieper, Hitler became concerned. Army Group South was clearly in trouble and something had to be done.

HITLER WANTED OIL

During July, Army Group Centre had advanced so rapidly that the area still under Soviet control formed a pocket where Army Groups Centre and South met. The pocket included Kiev, and almost the entire Soviet Southwestern Front, under the command of Marshal Semyon Budyonny, was trapped inside.

The concentration of Soviet soldiers threatened the German advance, but it was also an opportunity. If German forces could surround and capture the soldiers in the pocket, the victory would not only be a military triumph, it would also strengthen the men's morale.

The siege, however, required reinforcements, and recognising that the army groups could not be in two places at once, Hitler halted Army Group Centre's advance against Moscow. The conquest of Kiev now had priority, he stated in a letter on 12th August.

The army leadership protested. Moscow was not only the capital of the Soviet Union and therefore an important destination in itself, it was also the centre of the country's most extensive and advanced industrial facilities – facilities that could benefit the Germans in future warfare. Hitler, ►



Soviet grenade with 60-gram TNT explosive charge.

Pincer closes

Using attacks from the north and south, German forces crossed the Dnieper and surrounded the Red Army. The advance surprised the Soviets, who didn't have time to man Kiev's defences.

5 Tanks arrive from the north

16th September: Heinz Guderian's 2nd Panzer Group arrives from the north on 16th September and meets von Kleist. The encirclement is complete.

6 The pincer closes

26th September: Stalin's last forces in Kiev surrender.

4 Panzer group attacks from south

12th September: Building on their successes, the pincer manoeuvre is launched. Ewald von Kleist's 1st Panzer Group attacks from the south and quickly defeats the Soviets.

3 Defence force is caught off guard

10th September: German forces occupy the city of Romny. The attack comes from the rear and surprises the Soviet soldiers before they can man the defences around Kiev.

2 Vanguard crosses river

25th August: The German vanguard crosses the Dnieper via a pontoon bridge near the town of Dnepropetrovsk. Soviet soldiers have destroyed the original bridge, but German engineering corps quickly build a replacement.

1 German forces ready for attack

24th August: The Germans control the area west of the River Dnieper, but the defence of Kiev is strong. Half a million Soviet forces are ready.



German infantrymen march in a column along dusty roads towards Kiev.



Before the battle, the Eastern Front largely followed the west bank of the River Dnieper.

Half a million Soviet soldiers are trapped between two German forces.

The Luftwaffe's bombing destroyed a large number of Soviet vehicles.



however, imposed his will. The conquest of Kiev would provide access to the Don region's coal reserves and rich deposits of oil in the Caucasus. Abundant supplies of raw materials were a prerequisite for continuing the motorised blitzkrieg that had thus far provided the Nazis with so many victories. The encirclement and destruction of the Red Army's Southwestern Front would also be a chance to rectify Army Group South's previous failures. The attack was, Hitler stated, "an unexpected opportunity and a reprieve from past failures to trap the Soviet armies in the south".

Hard-pressed Army Group South was finally about to break through.

FIELD MARSHAL FIRED

Hitler's plan was simple: 2nd Panzer Group, under General Heinz Guderian, and 2nd Army from Army Group Centre were sent to Kiev to join Army Group South's 1st Panzer Group, under Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist, to surround Budyonny's forces in the pocket. Guderian was to attack from the north, while von Kleist advanced from the south. When the forces met, the pocket would be enclosed and the enemy captured.

The order to Guderian on the morning of 23rd August read: "The object is to destroy as much of the strength of the Russian Fifth Army as possible, and to open the Dnieper crossings for Army Group South with maximum speed." Guderian was to advance immediately, with his right flank facing the city of Chernihiv, 143 kilometres north of Kiev.

Marshal Budyonny was painfully aware of the seriousness of the situation. However, he also knew that Stalin was known

for executing any general who, without the Soviet leader's consent, allowed anything that looked like a retreat. Budyonny therefore sought Khrushchev's advice. The commissar had himself shot soldiers who'd retreated during German attacks, but admitted things looked grave. Together, Budyonny and Khrushchev developed a plan that could delay the advance of the Germans from the north and save the Red Army's forces in Kiev from capture.

"After considerable thought we arrived at the following decision: to take a certain number of troops and artillery and cover our flank in the direction from Kiev toward Kremenchug, so that ... there would be something with which to block the enemy's path northward and not allow him to close the ring of encirclement. What could we take? It was obvious that the troops we had in Kiev were so far not being used," Khrushchev said in his memoirs about the message to Stalin. The proposal was sent to Moscow, but Stalin didn't reply.

Instead, a plane bearing Marshal Semyon Timoshenko arrived in Kiev on 13th September. Timoshenko brought orders from Stalin that Marshal Budyonny should hand over the command of the Red Army's Southwestern Front to him.

RAIN DELAYED ADVANCE

Meanwhile, German troops relentlessly continued their advance. On 9th September, the city of Chernihiv fell, and the following day Guderian took Romny. The victory was significant for Germany, because the city was an assembly point for the Red Army and housed large depots of food and ammunition, as well as a warehouse with 80 cubic metres of precious fuel. Part of the triumph lay in the fact that the city was captured by a classic Nazi blitzkrieg attack. In the pouring rain, Guderian's tanks had roared right through the fortified lines north of the city before rolling into its streets.

While Guderian was occupying Romny, von Kleist was tasked with attacking Lubny, which lay directly to its south. The forces were to meet at the town of Lokhvytsia, which lay midway between Romny and Lubny, to close the pocket around the Soviets. The march forward, however, was something of an ordeal. The autumn *rasputitsa*, the season in which heavy rains turned Ukraine's dry dusty roads into thick mud, had begun. A soldier from the SS Panzer Division Das Reich marched south with Guderian's panzer group, and kept a diary of the experiences. "We march along a railway ►



Field radio was crucial for communication between German troops in joint manoeuvres, like the encirclement of the Red Army near Kiev.



German officers check that the telephones are working and the troops are in place around Kiev.

embankment. It is very tiring walking on the sleepers ... Our feet are suffering from being continually wet from the rain and the swamp," he wrote on 12th September. Two days later, the situation had only worsened: "On roads that have been washed away, in pouring rain, carrying all our weapons and equipment, we fight our way against enemy resistance. We are at the end of our strength. We have been marching for days and with only poor rations. The supply trucks are stuck fast in the mud 30 or more kilometres away. Many of the comrades have only socks to cover their feet. Their boots have fallen to pieces. Others go barefoot and their feet are torn as a result of the marches ... Soaked to the skin we dig in and our slit trenches fill quickly with water. The rain continues to pour down ... We are lying in water and yet we are thirsty."

The losses were also heavy. "We come under fire ... everywhere there are cries for stretcher-bearers ... Our company suffered 14 killed and 17 wounded," he wrote.

On 16th September, the vanguard of Guderian's forces from Army Group Centre finally reached the city of Lkhvytsia. The soldiers stopped at a ridge, where officers took out their binoculars and scouted towards the horizon. Clouds of smoke hung over the rooftops, and in the distance the crackle of machine guns and dull boom of field artillery sounded. The officers were in no doubt – only a few kilometres further on, Field Marshal von Kleist's Army Group South was waiting.

The forward units of the company rolled down from the ridge, over a small stream and into Lkhvytsia. The forces arrived at about the same time as the forward tanks from the 16th Panzer Division. The encirclement was complete, and the Soviet troops in Kiev and east of the city were trapped.

STALIN WAS ALARMED

As German forces approached Lkhvytsia, Stalin panicked. Despite fierce hatred for the capitalist West, he secretly sent a letter to the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. The message was a desperate plea for help. "If at the moment the opening of a second front in the west seems unfeasible to the British government, then perhaps some other means could be found of rendering the Soviet Union active military aid against the common enemy," the dictator wrote hopefully, continuing: "It seems to me that Britain could safely land 25-30 divisions at Archangel or ship them to the southern areas of the USSR via Iran for military cooperation with the Soviet troops."

The proposals were completely unrealistic. Britain did not have the forces to open another front, and sending ground troops to the slaughterhouse of the Eastern Front was completely unthinkable. That Stalin, despite his neurotic fear of interference in Soviet affairs, could come up with the proposals, testifies to the seriousness of the situation.

Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe's bombers headed towards Kiev. Their purpose was, the Germans stated threateningly, to reduce the city to "rubble and ashes" and thereby pave the way for the invading army. Because all the Soviet airfields in ►

FACTS

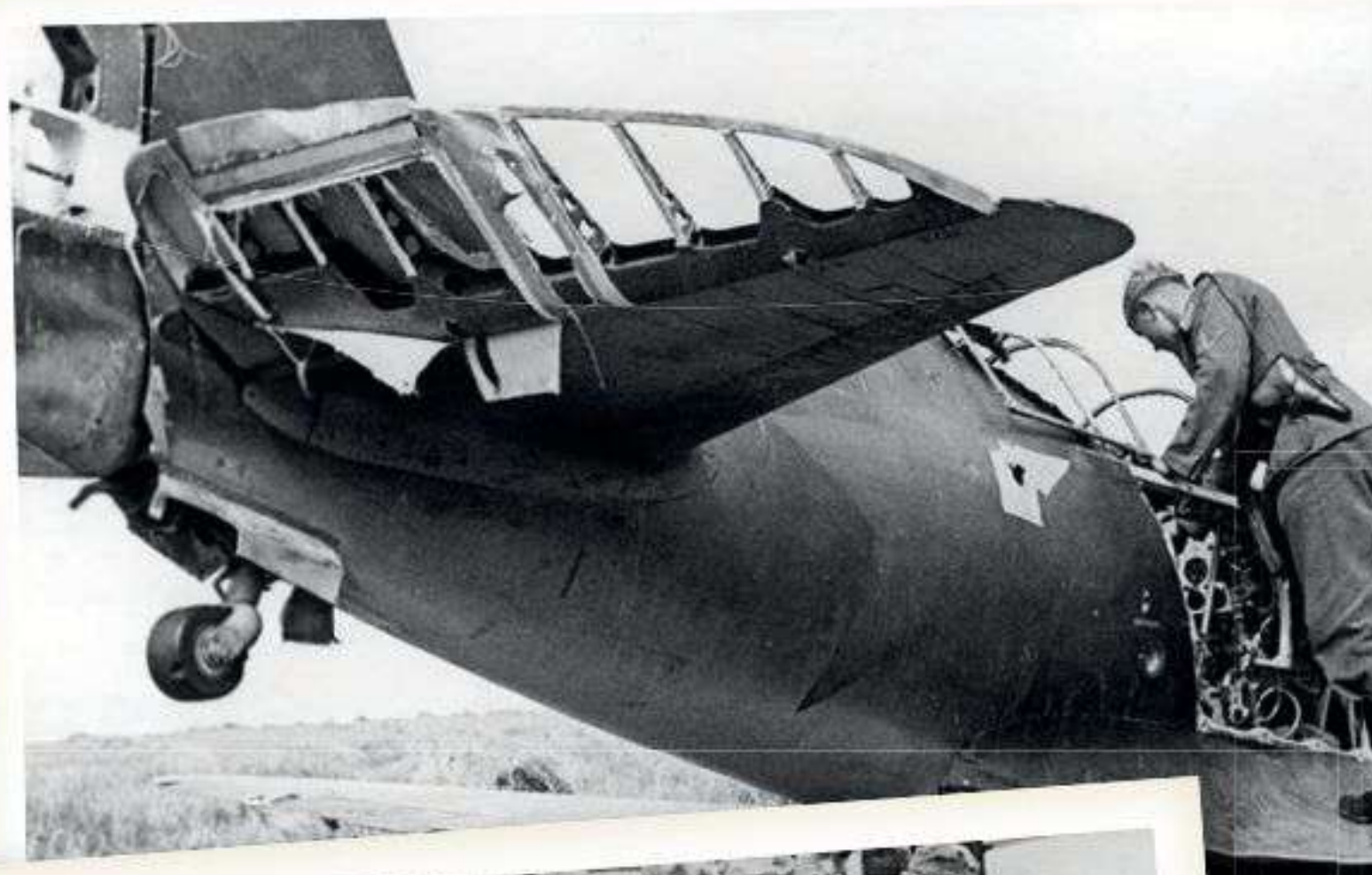
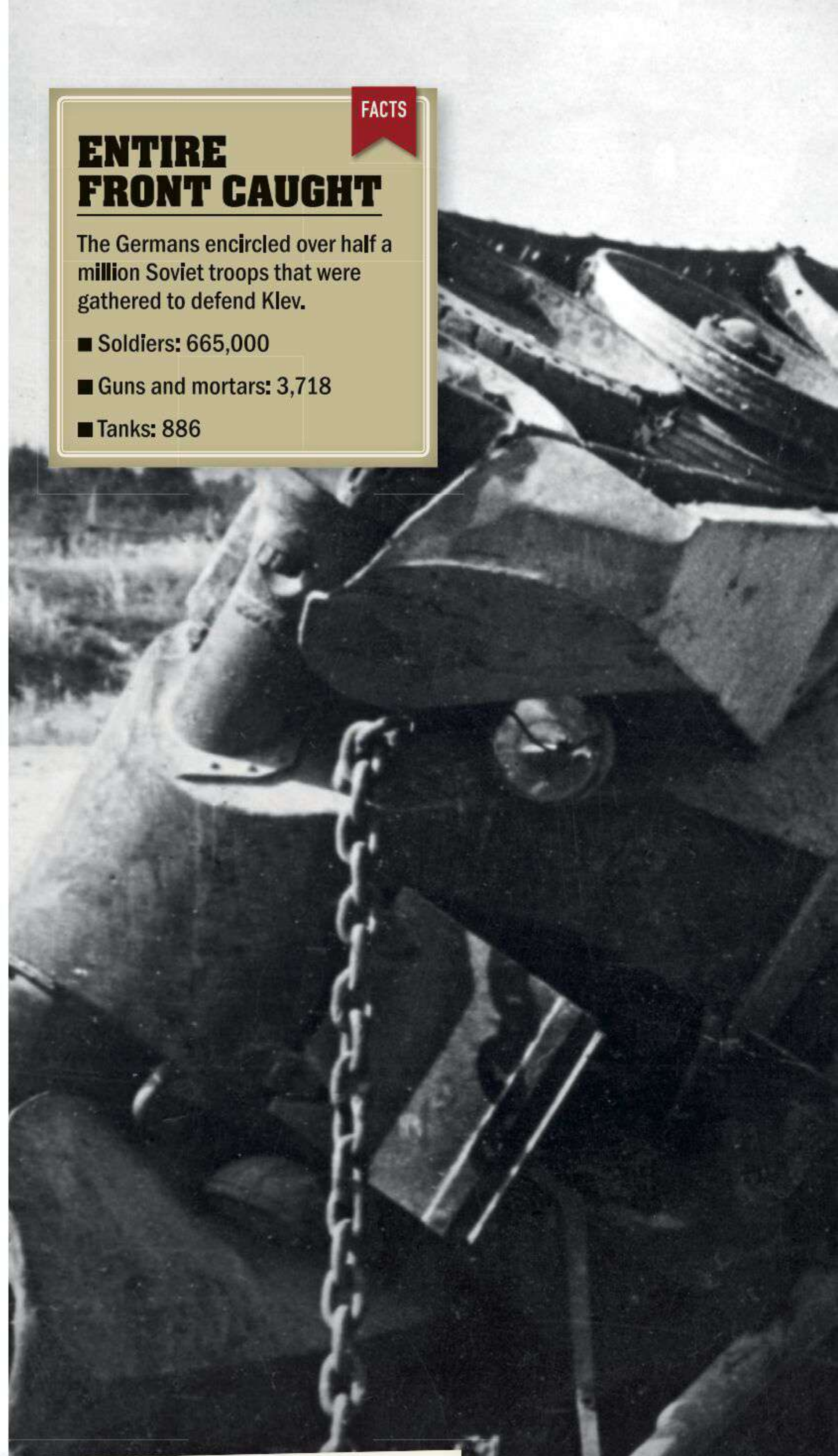
ENTIRE FRONT CAUGHT

The Germans encircled over half a million Soviet troops that were gathered to defend Kiev.

■ Soldiers: 665,000

■ Guns and mortars: 3,718

■ Tanks: 886



Only a few Soviet fighter planes took to the air and most were shot down.



Germans found and neutralised some of the Soviet mines in the city.



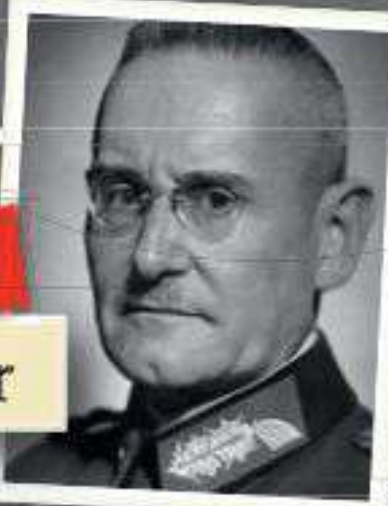
Up to 1,000 Soviet tanks were either captured by the Germans or destroyed in the Battle of Kiev.

Hitler made fateful choice

In the summer of 1941, Germany’s military leadership faced a crucial choice: should the army concentrate on occupying Moscow or deploy the main force in the attack on Kiev and the rich oil fields in the Caucasus? The decision helped decide the war.

CAPTURE MOSCOW

Franz Halder



OCCUPY KIEV AND CAUCASUS

Adolf Hitler



OBJECTIVES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Occupy the Soviet Union’s capital.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Capture the whole of Ukraine and the Caucasus.
BENEFITS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Germans would gain control of the Soviet Union’s largest industrial area and important supply lines, because Moscow was a railway hub. Capturing Moscow would also drive out the Soviet government and be a psychological and propaganda triumph.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• With access to oil from the Caucasus, the army’s perpetual supply problem would be solved. At the same time, Ukraine was known as the breadbasket of the Soviet Union, boasting huge levels of agricultural production.
TIME FRAME	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Before the winter of 1941-42.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• During 1942.
DIFFICULTIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Soviet forces and locals were likely to mobilise a fierce defence of the country’s capital. The supply lines would be very long and the Germans’ flanks would be exposed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Soviet force of over half a million men was gathered around Kiev. The roads were bad and the autumn rains would make it difficult for tanks and other heavy vehicles in particular to get there.
PROONENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• General and Chief of Staff Franz Halder and most of the Army High Command.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adolf Hitler.

Six thousand buildings in Kiev were destroyed and over ten thousand people lost their homes.

Mines set fire to city

The Red Army left Kiev densely mined with explosives. Five days after the surrender, the mines exploded and the city caught fire.

The fighting over Kiev left the city in ruins, and the destruction continued after the German victory. Before the surrender, Soviet forces had left 40,000 mines in buildings that the Germans were likely to use. An armoury and the Grand Hotel, for example, were mined. The bombs were fitted with remote controls or timers and exploded on 24th September. Dozens of German officers were killed at the hotel. The explosions ignited a fire that raged for four days, and scattered explosions continued until mid-October. Kiev was devastated, and when winter came, over 100,000 Ukrainians had no roof over their heads.

the area had been destroyed, the Stuka planes had nothing to stop them – an opportunity of which the Luftwaffe took full advantage. Between 12th and 21st September, V Air Corps alone flew 1,422 missions. In total, the planes dropped 567,560 kilograms of explosives, including incendiary bomb clusters. The Luftwaffe preferred to drop its shells on wooded areas close to the roads.

“Not seeing, but expecting, and rightly so, that the woods were providing resting places for army units and their horses, German planes were bombing them, particularly at night,” said Gabriel Temkin, a Jew who had been drafted into a Soviet

labour battalion. The planes bombed especially at night. “For the first time I smelled burnt flesh,” he added.

Horrific deaths affected not only the Soviet troops;

Food parcels were part of workers' wages in German-occupied territories.



whenever the Red Army captured a German, they exacted a cruel revenge for the attacks. SS officer Erich Kern forever remembered the scene that met him in a grove near Kiev:

“The little trees were bearing fruit, very strange fruit – German soldiers. They were not a pretty sight, with their arms tied high behind them to the weak branches, their jackboots off and their legs burnt and calcined up to their knees. So distorted were their faces that even seasoned soldiers had to look away,” said Kern. The Soviet forces had dipped the prisoners’ legs in petrol and set fire to their feet. Shock and blood-loss killed the men, but only after several hours of inhuman pain. The cruel method of execution came to be known as “Stalin’s socks”.

SCARED SOVIET SOLDIERS SHOT EACH OTHER

The Luftwaffe was still bombing Kiev as German infantry divisions moved towards the city. The soldiers were greeted by the sound of Stalin’s voice booming from large loudspeakers. The commissars hoped the dictator’s words would strengthen the morale of the Soviet soldiers and Kiev’s citizens.

Finally, the Germans could see Kiev’s towers and the iron bridge across the Dnieper. At the city limits, their tanks blasted their way through the maze of Soviet bunkers. Inside the city, they fired shells at buildings occupied by the Red Army. The Germans used smokescreens to prevent the Soviet forces from seeing what the attackers were doing.

The Soviets responded to the fire but couldn’t keep up with the Germans pressing in on the defenders from all sides. Soviet commissars were employed to maintain morale and instil the right mindset among troops. But the time for encouraging speeches was over, and the commissars were running through the soldiers’ ranks, shooting men who were trying to abandon their posts. Panicking, soldiers began firing on the commissars in self-defence.

On 19th September, the Germans’ breakthrough came, and at 11.00, the Wehrmacht was able to hoist a swastika flag over Kiev. The Germans had taken around 665,000 prisoners and seized 3,718 guns and 886 tanks. But around 15,000 Soviet soldiers had managed to flee the pocket. “The barricading line was often penetrated by night; the motorised troops, especially the tanks, were then off the road at night and in forest or marsh were less capable of hermetically sealing,” explained Major General Günther Blumentritt later.

VICTORY WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE END

In the days that followed, the two sides still fought scattered battles, but resistance slowly petered out. The victory caused Hitler great pleasure at his headquarters. The Führer “is exceptionally happy about this development and radiates real joy”, wrote Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels.

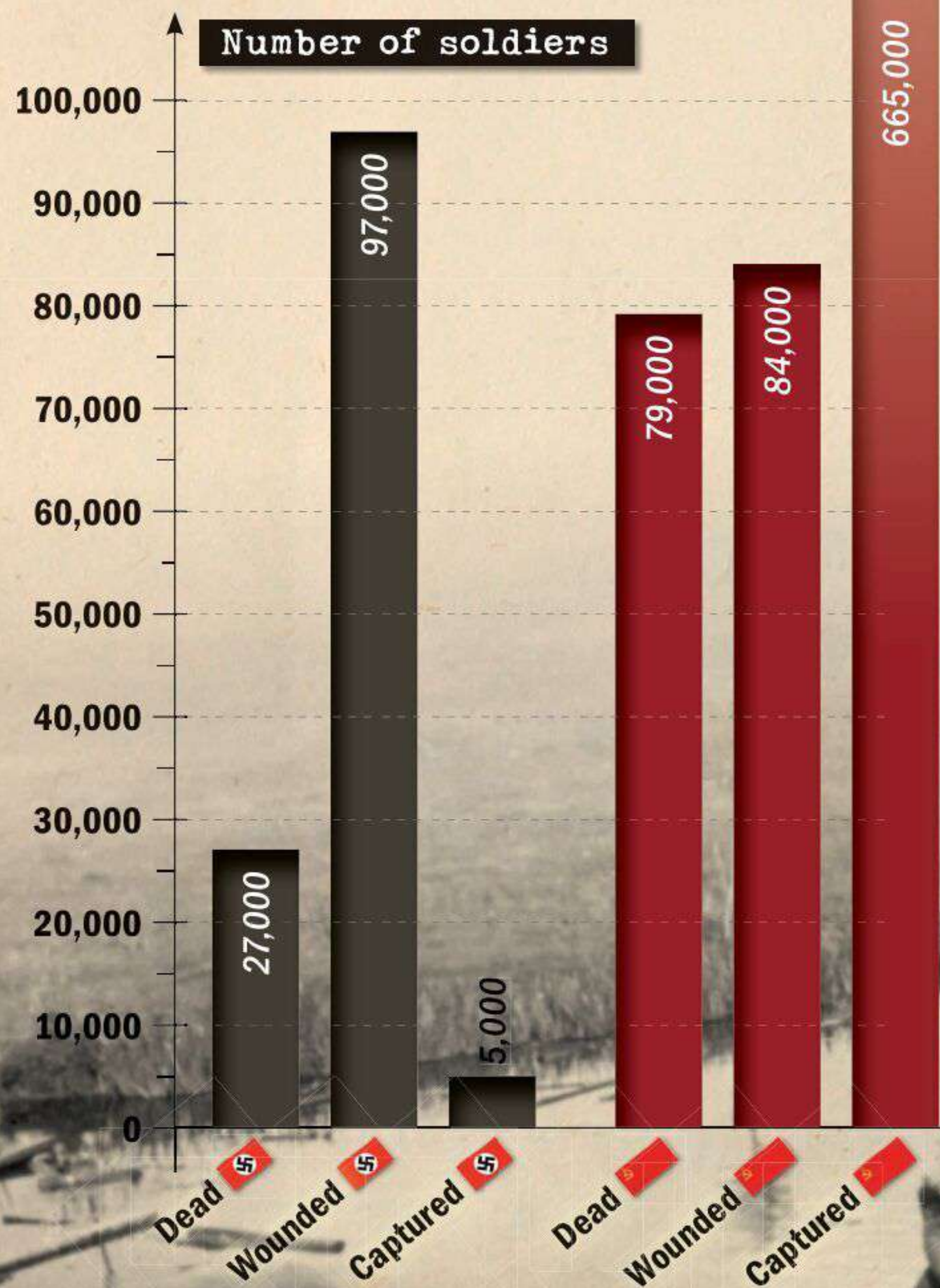
Goebbels himself thought that Germany’s misfortunes in the East were now over: “The spell is broken. The Führer believes that heavy fighting will last until about 15th October; after that, he believes, the Bolshevik will be on the run.”

Goebbels was gravely mistaken. Hitler’s prioritisation of the oil fields in the Caucasus weakened the pressure on Moscow. Stalin managed to put solid defences in place before the Germans arrived. Moscow was never captured, and with the capital out of reach, victory over Stalin’s Soviet Union slowly but surely slipped away from Nazi Germany. ■

Soviet bloodshed

Stalin was hit hard by the Battle of Kiev. The Red Army lost over six times as many men as the Wehrmacht, and a large proportion of the captured Soviets later perished in German camps. There was also the loss of large quantities of tanks, weapons and ammunition, which were captured by the Germans.

Soviets lost six times as many men



"The German people thank their brave soldiers," reads the text on the medal for the Battle of Kiev.



Soviet soldiers surrender. Over half a million were taken into German captivity.

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EASTERN FRONT

HITLER'S SECRET DEATH



VANS

At the beginning of World War II, Nazi Germany developed special lorries that could gas 40–90 people in a matter of minutes. The Nazi leadership was keen to use them and sent the vans east. They were first used in Poland, then when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, Hitler's lorries followed in the army's footsteps.

GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY/SCANPIX



WARNING:
Disturbing content
The following pages contain
graphic accounts from
World War II.

EASTERN EUROPE/1939-45

Hitler believes Germans have a right to *Lebensraum* – a territory they can colonise and develop. As a result, he issues orders for the people of Eastern Europe to be enslaved or removed. New mass extinction methods are required...



BY TROELS USSING

Driver Wilhelm Sackenreuter tightly gripped the steering wheel as he steered his lorry off the bumpy dirt track. He pulled up by a group of SS soldiers, who were smoking their morning cigarettes in front of the entrance to an abandoned mine, just outside the city of Stalino (present-day Donetsk in Ukraine).

Despite wearing an immaculate black SS uniform, Sackenreuter immediately stepped down from the cab and climbed beneath his long, grey lorry and began tinkering with some pipes.

The lorry resembled a removal van: there were no windows in the cargo area – everything was completely enclosed, and thick iron bars blocked the heavy rear doors.

With cigarettes dangling from the corners of their mouths, the SS troops from Einsatzgruppe C (Task Force C) looked on with indifference – they knew what was about to happen, because they'd witnessed it many times before as they travelled through the vast territories that the German armed forces had captured in the Soviet Union.

Sackenreuter got to his feet, jumped into the cab and turned the key. The engine started thrumming again. Shortly after, a gentle knock was heard from inside the cargo area, but soon the noises changed to a loud, frantic banging.

"Germans, let us out. We beg you!" yelled frightened voices from inside the van. But the back doors remained closed.

The pleas became screams of desperation and the truck started rocking on the ground as those trapped within struggled to escape. After a few minutes,

the noise subsided and everything went quiet. Sackenreuter switched off the engine, walked to the back of the truck and opened the heavy doors with difficulty. He quickly stepped to one side to avoid being hit by the first corpses that fell to the ground. Using a torch, Sackenreuter illuminated the compartment, where exhaust fumes still hung thickly in the air. A jumble of men, women and children lay on top of each other on the van's bed.

"All dead," he announced and indicated that the Einsatzgruppen could start emptying the mobile gas chamber.

The massacre on that beautiful spring day in 1942 had gone according to plan. Soon the "death van", as the locals called the vehicles, would take on a fresh load.

Gas trucks to exterminate the sick

Since the 1930s, Hitler had strived to purify the German race and create a physically and mentally superior people. In the Führer's opinion, those who were disabled or mentally ill stood in the way of developing a strong Germanic people, so he ordered that all "life unworthy of life" be eradicated.

From the autumn of 1939, German doctors were encouraged to commit euthanasia on patients deemed "incurable", as Hitler put it in a secret document. With overdoses of morphine and sleeping pills, doctors simply got rid of any unwanted children and adults.

The medicine required was expensive, however, and the campaign in Poland, from September to October 1939, had

NAZI GAS EXPERIMENTS



Carbon monoxide

Application: Used from 1940 to 1941 in the first series of gas vans.

Pros: Odourless and gave victims a relatively peaceful death because the prisoners fell unconscious before dying.

Cons: Expensive to produce and the gas cylinders were cumbersome to transport over long distances and to areas with a poor road network.



SHUTTERSTOCK

also made it clear that Germany would need significantly more hospitals to treat soldiers wounded in the fighting in Eastern Europe.

Thus, hospital patients in occupied Poland had to be got rid of quickly, so that wounded Germans could be treated instead. The task required a cheap, quick method of killing the sick.

Two German chemists were put to work, experimenting on rats using different types of gas. They were both officers in the SS – Hitler's corps of indoctrinated Nazis who had sworn to obey the Führer's orders without question – and the two worked around the clock to find the most effective method of execution.

The chemists, August Becker and Albert Widmann, found that carbon monoxide worked well. The deadly gas was tested on humans in January 1940 in a former prison in Brandenburg, where the Nazis forced 20 mentally ill men into a hermetically sealed room, that was slowly filled with concentrated carbon monoxide from a gas cylinder.

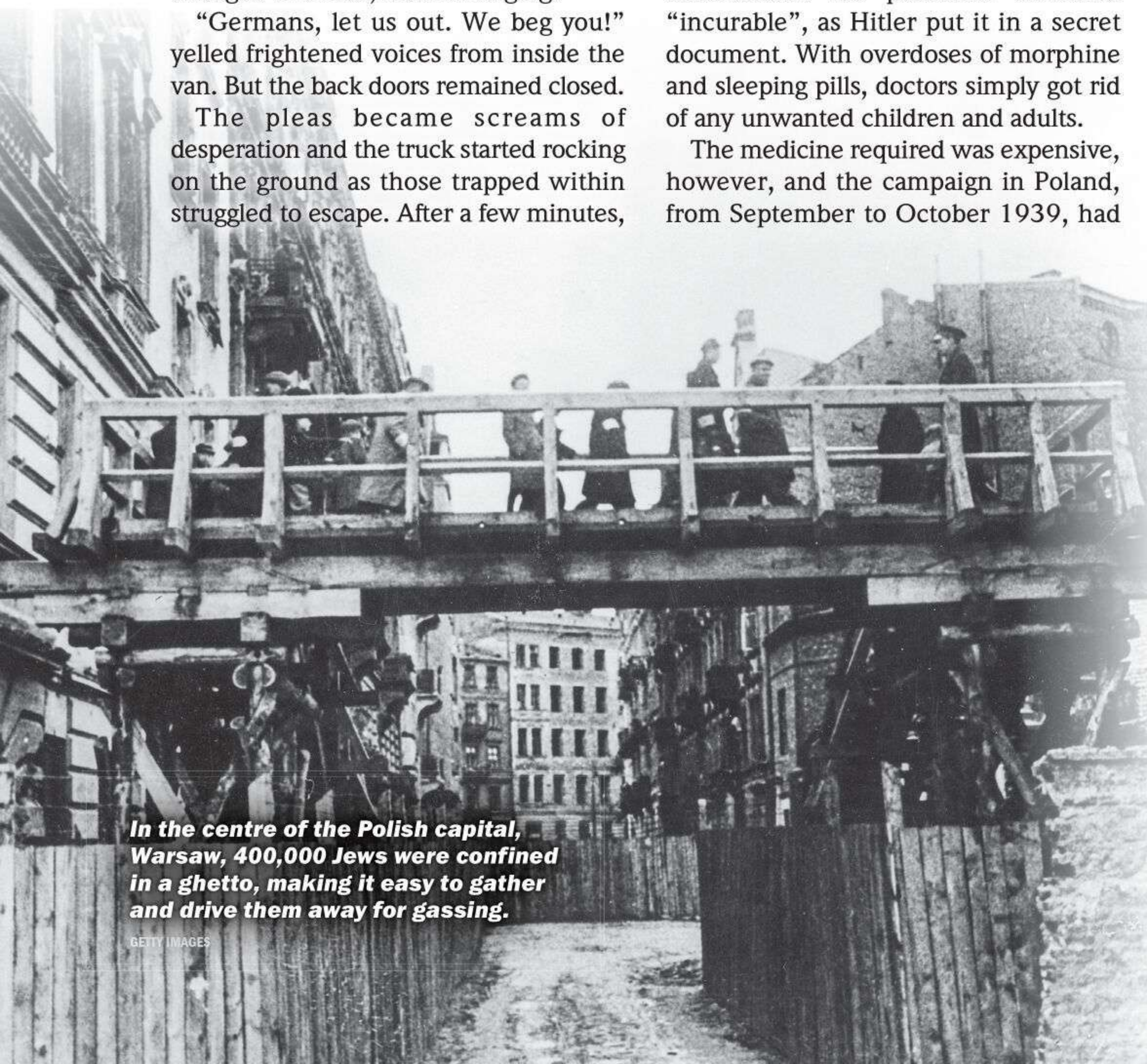
After five minutes, the men lay dead on the floor, and the Nazis present nodded appreciatively – the method of execution was approved. Now it had to be used on a large scale.

Cylinders of carbon monoxide were driven from Germany to occupied Poland, where SS-Sturmbannführer (equivalent to major) Herbert Lange was in the process of developing a truck that could be used as a mobile execution chamber. The truck was to remove patients from psychiatric hospitals, gas them, then drive the victims to remote areas where their bodies could be disposed of in secret.

The first development phase of the gas vans was so secret that only a few official documents about their construction were prepared. None survived the war.

The only descriptions of the truck come from Polish prisoners who were forced to work for Lange's special unit:

"This vehicle was converted for this purpose in the courtyard of the ... Gestapo headquarters in Poznan. Four



In the centre of the Polish capital, Warsaw, 400,000 Jews were confined in a ghetto, making it easy to gather and drive them away for gassing.

GETTY IMAGES

prisoners from our group, including myself and the carpenter Józef Szymanski, had to line the interior of the vehicle with plywood,” said the Pole Henryk Maliczak after the war. The conversion was to ensure that the cargo area of the van was hermetically sealed, so that the gas didn’t seep out through small cracks during executions.

He and other witnesses remember that Lange’s gas truck bore the logo of Kaiser’s Kaffee Geschäft (Kaiser’s Coffee Company) on the sides. The logo was supposed to make civilians assume the vehicle belonged to an innocuous coffee distributor, disguising its true nature: a four-wheeled death machine designed to exterminate all unwanted people in occupied Poland.

Himmler splattered by brain matter

On 15th January 1940, Lange’s gas van appeared in the town of Koscian in southern Poland. Two officers and SS soldiers in accompanying trucks arrived at the same time and began emptying the city’s psychiatric hospital of patients.

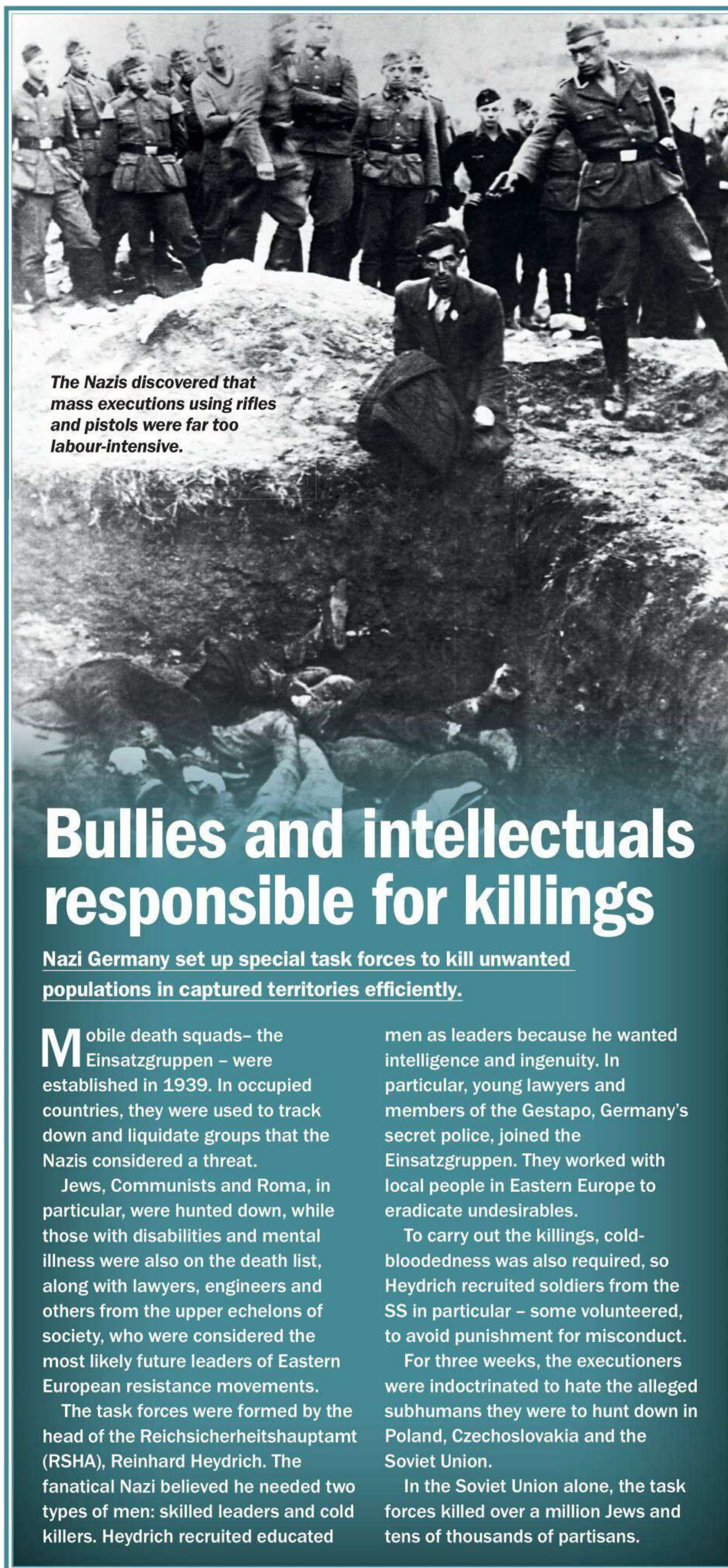
The weather was biting cold and the patients, wearing only thin shirts and trousers, shivered as they were escorted out of the institution and into the black truck bearing the coffee logo on its side.

The SS forced about 40 patients into the back before the van left the site. For a week, the truck picked up load after load, until 534 patients from the hospital had been gassed and disposed of.

Thereafter, the gas van continued its business, exterminating unwanted Poles. Lange’s group was not the only one that eagerly threw itself into the task of eradicating unwanted people. Other Einsatzgruppen carried out executions with a bullet to the head, and the number of special forces deployed for the purpose grew and grew.

When Hitler declared war on the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, and German tanks rolled into the Soviet republics of Belarus and Ukraine, the Einsatzgruppen were able to muster as many as 3,000 soldiers. In August, SS commander-in-chief Heinrich Himmler personally attended a mass execution in Belarus’s capital, Minsk. Here, victims were shot and fell into a mass grave.

“After many volleys, I could see that Himmler was trembling. He ran his hand across his face and swayed. ‘You could have spared yourself and me this,’ I said to him. His face was almost green. And then he said, ‘A piece of brain just splattered in my face.’ He immediately ►



The Nazis discovered that mass executions using rifles and pistols were far too labour-intensive.

Bullies and intellectuals responsible for killings

Nazi Germany set up special task forces to kill unwanted populations in captured territories efficiently.

Mobile death squads– the Einsatzgruppen – were established in 1939. In occupied countries, they were used to track down and liquidate groups that the Nazis considered a threat.

Jews, Communists and Roma, in particular, were hunted down, while those with disabilities and mental illness were also on the death list, along with lawyers, engineers and others from the upper echelons of society, who were considered the most likely future leaders of Eastern European resistance movements.

The task forces were formed by the head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA), Reinhard Heydrich. The fanatical Nazi believed he needed two types of men: skilled leaders and cold killers. Heydrich recruited educated

men as leaders because he wanted intelligence and ingenuity. In particular, young lawyers and members of the Gestapo, Germany’s secret police, joined the Einsatzgruppen. They worked with local people in Eastern Europe to eradicate undesirables.

To carry out the killings, cold-bloodedness was also required, so Heydrich recruited soldiers from the SS in particular – some volunteered, to avoid punishment for misconduct.

For three weeks, the executioners were indoctrinated to hate the alleged subhumans they were to hunt down in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.

In the Soviet Union alone, the task forces killed over a million Jews and tens of thousands of partisans.

Death awaited in innocent-looking trucks

Hitler's death vans were converted lorries that looked innocuous. It was important that the prisoners didn't panic, and the tight schedule meant that the gassing was over in quarter of an hour.

Coffee logo tricked prisoners

The Nazis' first gas truck had a logo from the coffee manufacturer Kaiser's Kaffee on the sides. It ensured the death van didn't cause a stir on the streets.



CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIE

Mats increased efficiency

Straw mats on the floor were intended to stop victims slipping when they were herded inside. If the prisoners stayed upright, more could be fitted into the gas van at a time.

Packed in like sardines

The hold of the large Saurer trucks was 5.8 metres long and, according to witnesses, could hold 70–90 tightly packed prisoners at once.

threw up," an SS officer who was present later recalled.

Himmler was shaken and decided that a more "humane method" was needed, so his men could avoid the psychological "hardship" that shooting people risked inflicting on his special forces. After several meetings with SS-Sturmbannführer Lange, Himmler and the head of the Reichsicherheitshauptamt (Reich Main Security Office), or RSHA, Reinhard Heydrich, agreed upon a

supposedly gentler method: gassing, using Lange's special vehicles. But the poor condition of the roads in the Soviet Union made regular deliveries of carbon monoxide cylinders impossible. Instead, chemical engineer Widmann suggested that the trucks' own exhaust gas be used.

When a test gassing of 40 Soviet POWs in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp went according to plan, eight more trucks were converted to the new type of gas van. Some were small Opel Blitz

trucks, with room for a maximum of 40 people in the back, while larger Saurer trucks could gas over 60 at once. Four vehicles were sent to Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union, three drove to the Chelmno concentration camp in Poland, and the last went to Riga in Latvia.

Ukrainians refused to be deceived

After a few months, it was time to evaluate the vans' performance, and the SS sent the chemist August Becker – one



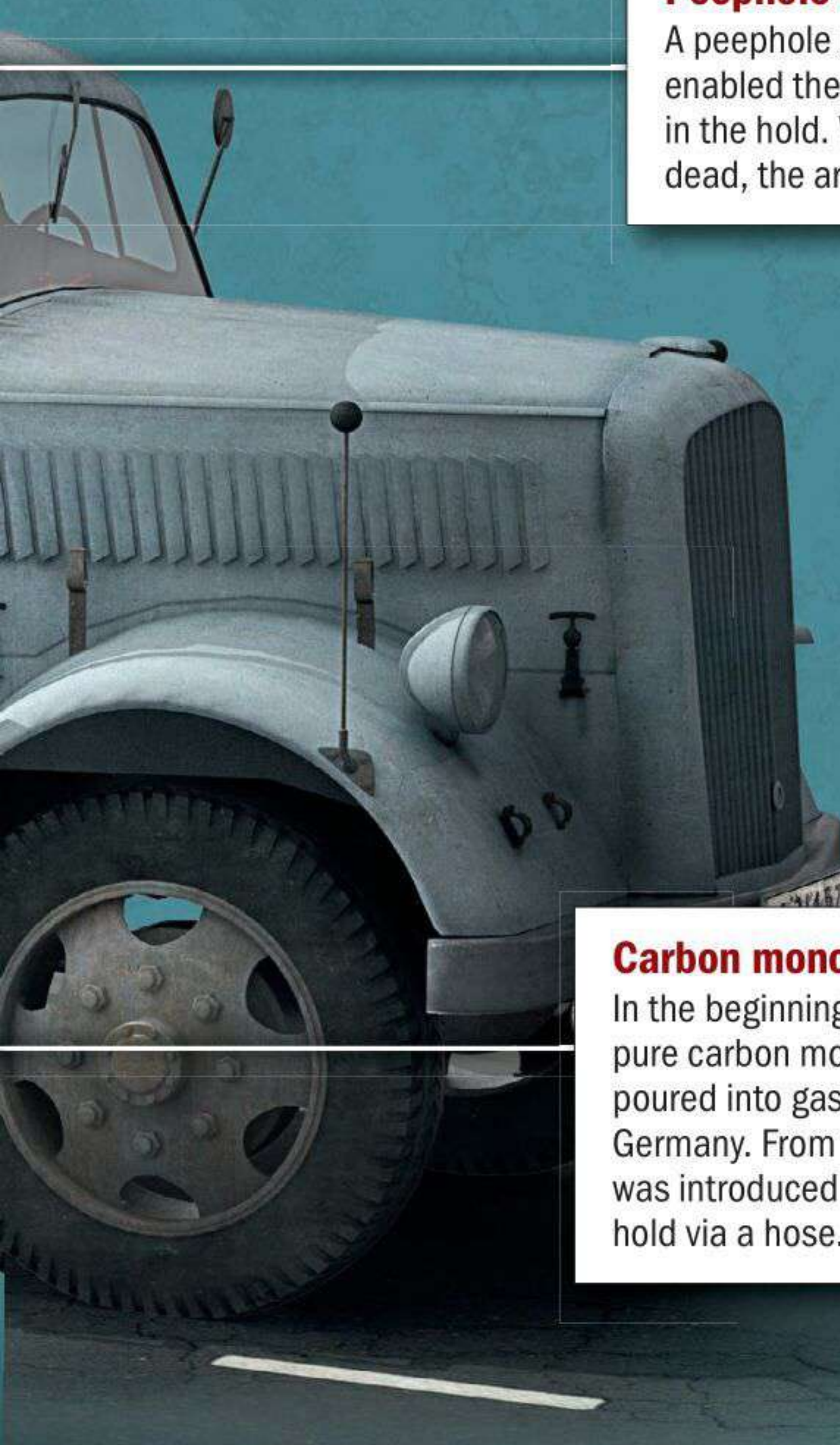
MUZEUM MARTYROLOGICZNE

Airtight hold

Metal sheets lined the cargo hold. The joints between the plates were sealed with plywood to make the gas chamber airtight, so that the deadly gas did not leak out.

Peephole into cargo area

A peephole behind the driver's seat enabled the driver to see prisoners in the hold. When everyone was dead, the area could be emptied.



Carbon monoxide transport

In the beginning, the death vans used pure carbon monoxide, produced and poured into gas cylinders at home in Germany. From the cylinders, the gas was introduced into the airtight cargo hold via a hose.

CARBON MONOXIDE KILLED IN 15 MINUTES

1 Victims inhaled the gas

Presumably, the victims tried to hold their breath while carbon monoxide leaked into the hold. After a few minutes, they would have gasped for air and their lungs would fill with the deadly gas.

2 Carbon monoxide entered the blood

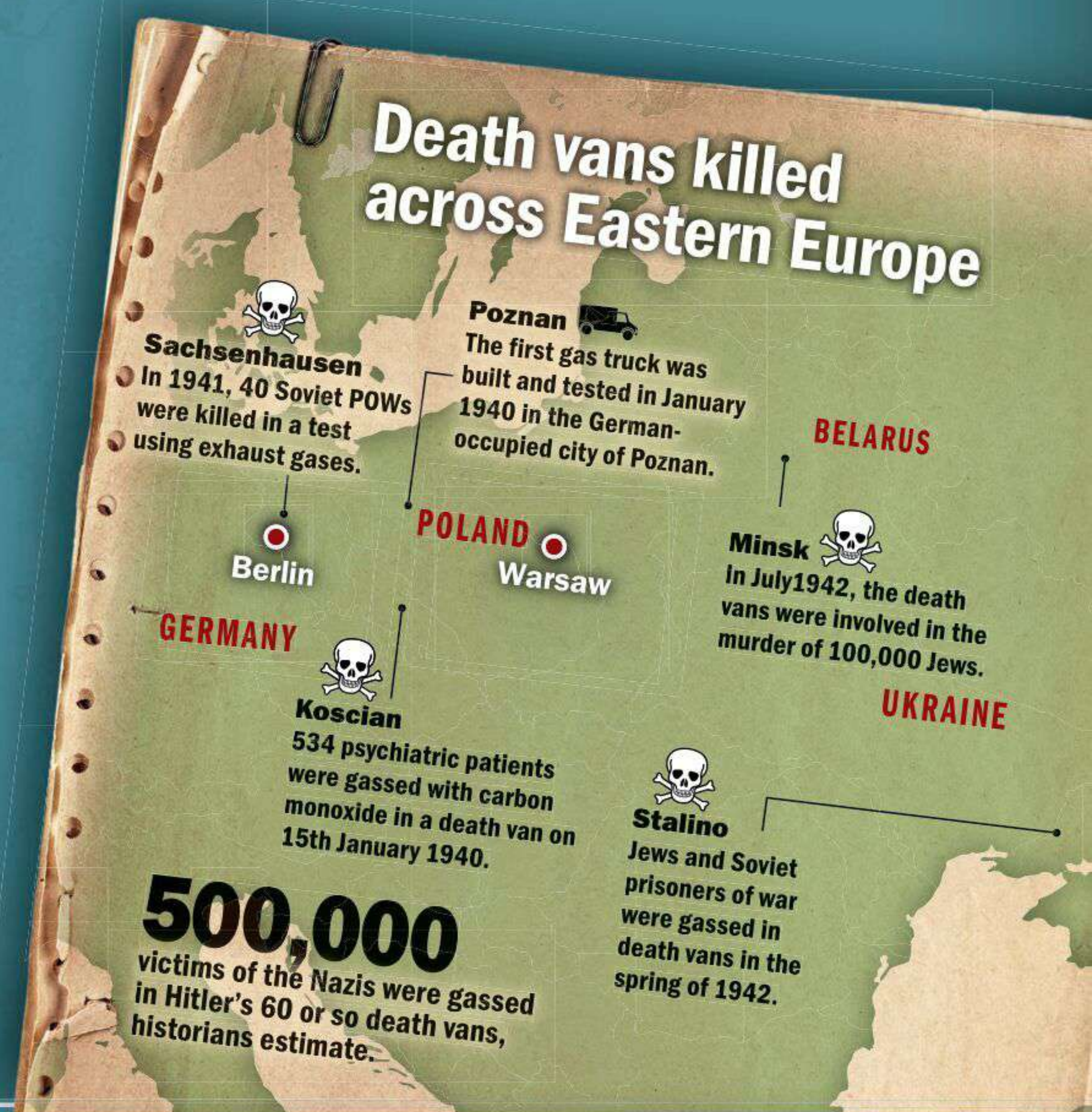
From the lungs, the carbon monoxide moved into the blood and bound itself to red blood cells, which transport oxygen around the body.

3 Nausea and dizziness set in

When the carbon monoxide bound itself to red blood cells, they could no longer transport enough oxygen around the body, and oxygen deficiency occurred. The victims became dizzy, with headaches and nausea. Then after a few minutes, they fainted.

4 Victims lay lifeless on floor

The lack of oxygen meant that the brain, heart and other vital organs stopped functioning. Around 15 minutes after the gassing began, the victims collapsed down dead.



of the originators of the gassing method – to the Soviet Union to see the mobile execution chambers in action. He followed several massacres in Ukraine with interest – from the collection of prisoners to the execution, which took place “10-15 kilometres from the highways”, according to Becker.

The Ukrainian side roads were often clogged by rain and snow, which made them difficult for the large Saurer trucks to negotiate. However, Becker believed

that transporting the prisoners away from the city was necessary in order to conceal the massacres, but he soon learned that the Ukrainians were keeping an eye on the gas trucks. So, in the spring, he decided that the trucks should be made to look less suspicious:

“I ordered the vans of group D to be camouflaged as house-trailers by putting one set of window shutters on each side of the small van and two on each side of the larger vans, such as one often sees

on farm-houses in the country,” Becker wrote in May 1942, in a letter to Walter Rauff, head of the RSHA’s technical department in Berlin.

Becker, however, soon realised that even this ruse could not deflect the Ukrainians’ suspicion when the gas trucks travelled between towns and nearby forests or mines.

“The vans became so well known, that not only the authorities, but also the civilian population alluded to it as the ►



NAZI GAS EXPERIMENTS

Exhaust fumes

Application: Used from 1941 to 1943 by the Germans' second series of gas vans. A hose was mounted on the truck's exhaust pipe and routed into the hold.

Pros: The exhaust gas was readily available as the German special units drove around in trucks.

Cons: The smell caused the victims to panic, which could damage the truck.

'death van', as soon as one of these vehicles appeared. In my opinion even with camouflage the van cannot be kept secret for any length of time," he stated.

Exhaust gas caused problems

The gassing of prisoners also gave the chemist cause for concern. Becker wanted the prisoners to have a peaceful death, because it caused fewer problems and sped things up, so the truck could collect and kill an extra load of victims each day. He noted that many of the truck drivers were too eager when they sent gas from the cab into the cargo area. To get the killings over as quickly as possible, the driver stepped on the accelerator too hard, so the victims were suffocated by diesel fumes instead of dying from carbon monoxide poisoning.

So in 1942, when Becker visited the Einsatzgruppen, he instructed the drivers to be patient, so the victims fell "asleep peacefully", as he described it.

Becker also noticed another frequent mistake that the troops made – namely standing too close to the trucks when the gassing was in progress.

"I ordered that during the gassing all the men were to be kept as far away from the vans as possible, so they should not suffer damage to their health by any escaping gases," read the letter to Rauff, in which Becker also pointed out that several officers left their own men in charge of emptying the truck after the gassing, which the chemist feared could lead to "immense psychological injuries and damages to their health ... if not immediately, at least later on".

On Rauff's orders, most Einsatzgruppen began using other prisoners or forced labourers to drag corpses out of the trucks and dispose of them.

Gas trucks got their own camp

While the Einsatzgruppen and their gas trucks struggled on the muddy roads to reach every corner of the vast territory that the Germans had captured from the Soviet Union, Herbert Lange made other plans in Poland. Here, he had only ►

The Nazi persecution of Jews began with calls for an economic boycott of Jewish shops and ended with mass extermination.

GETTY IMAGES





DEATH VANS MADE MORE EFFICIENT

The gas trucks were continuously improved to enable them to kill more people in less time. On 5th June 1942, foreman Willi Just from the workshop that converted the trucks sent his recommendations to Walter Rauff, who was responsible for the production of the gas vans:

Reduce length of truck

"The normal capacity of the vans is nine to ten [people] per square metre. The capacity of the larger special Saurer vans is not so great [because] of off-road manoeuvrability on all terrains ... It would appear that a reduction in the cargo area is necessary ... by about one metre. The problem cannot be solved by merely reducing the number of subjects treated, as ... a longer running time is required, as the empty space also needs to be filled with [carbon monoxide]."

Protect the bulb

"The grille should cover the lamps high enough up to make it impossible to break the bulb. It seems these lamps are hardly ever turned on, so the users have suggested that they can be done away with. Experience shows, however, that when the back door is closed and it gets dark inside, the load pushes hard against the door. The reason for this is that when it becomes dark inside the load rushes toward what little light is left."



Nozzle must point downwards

"The pipe that connects the exhaust to the van tends to rust, because it is eaten away from the inside by liquids that flow into it. To avoid this, the nozzle should be so arranged as to point downward. The liquids will thus be prevented from flowing into the pipe."

Faster cleaning

"To facilitate the cleaning of the vehicle, an opening will be made in the floor to allow for drainage ... The floor of the vehicle can be tipped slightly."

Peephole to go

"The observation windows [behind the driver's seat] ... could be eliminated, as they are hardly ever used. Considerable time will be saved in the production of the new vans."

Grid on floor speeds up process

"To facilitate the rapid unloading of the vehicles, a removable grid is to be placed on the floor. It will slide on rollers on a U-shaped rail. It will be removed and put in position by means of a small winch placed under the vehicle. The firm charged with the alterations has stated that it is not able to continue for the moment, due to a lack of staff and materials. Another firm will have to be found."





NAZI GAS EXPERIMENTS

Zyklon B

Application: Primarily used from 1943 to 1945 in Nazi death camps, where the gas was piped into large chambers via holes in the ceiling.

Pros: The gas paralysed the victims' nervous system quickly, so they suffocated after a few minutes.

Cons: The poisonous gas could be stored for a maximum of three months, after which it lost its effect.



3REICH-COLLECTOR.COM

three vans at his disposal, so instead of wasting time driving to prisoners to kill them, the prisoners would come to him.

In a deserted forest area three kilometres outside the town of Chełmno, Lange set up the Germans' first death camp. Unlike Nazi concentration camps, where undesirables toiled and slaved, no one had to work for their food in Lange's camp. At Chełmno, prisoners came only to die. The first victims were gassed in the camp in December 1941, using Lange's preferred system of bottled carbon monoxide, but in 1942, the executioner switched to the new method, where exhaust was sent directly into the rear of a van.

In Chełmno, the Einsatzgruppen sent victims through a long passage, with a tall fence on both sides. The passage got narrower and narrower, and ended with prisoners walking up a ramp and entering the hold of a waiting gas truck.

The door was closed, and the exhaust pipe connected to the hold before the truck left the camp with live prisoners on board – to save time, the victims were gassed en route to a mass grave in the forest. However, when a truck crashed and Poles from nearby villages heard screaming, the process changed.

When SS-Hauptscharführer (equivalent to master sergeant) Gustav Laabs was transferred to Chełmno to be a gas truck driver, the executions were taking place in the camp. He was uneasy about his task when he arrived in spring 1942.

SS-Hauptsturmführer (equivalent to captain) Hans Bothmann had just taken over the leadership of Chełmno from Lange, and he immediately put the new driver to work. Laabs had no idea what was going to happen when he backed his truck up to the small opening at the end of the ramp. Soon others opened the back doors, got "under the van and [did] something there", as Laabs described it during his trial 20 years later.

Soon after, the driver heard screaming, and the truck began to rock as 70 or so people were squeezed into the back.

"When the van was full, the doors were closed and locked ... Bothmann ... ordered me to start the motor and let it run for 20 minutes. I started the motor, and after about one minute I heard terrible moaning and screaming coming from inside the van. I was overcome by fear and jumped out of the cab ... Bothmann yelled at me and ordered me to get back inside. I sat and waited. I couldn't do anything, because I was afraid of Bothmann. Slowly the moans

and cries faded away," Laabs explained from the witness stand.

In time, however, he got used to his job as executioner. Soon, he fitted the hose that carried the gas into the truck's hold himself, and shot any prisoners who miraculously survived the gassing.

Horrific scenes met workers

After the gassing, the loaded truck drove out of the camp gate and to a nearby forest. Here, other Polish prisoners stood ready to empty the hold of corpses and throw them into open mass graves – a difficult and gruesome task:

"The corpses that fell out of the truck were clinging to one another, as if in convulsive grasps, in contorted positions, sometimes with mangled faces. I saw one with the teeth sunk into another's jaw, while others had their noses or fingers bitten off," explained one of the few survivors from these work teams.

"The Gestapo officers ordered us to separate the corpses, and if this did not work, then to chop them up, cutting off hands, legs and other parts," he recalled.

Another worker recalled that gassing didn't always work and some children were still alive when they arrived, as the gas hadn't diffused down to their level. In those cases, the Nazis smashed the children's skulls on the spot.

3,000 murdered every day

Chełmno's gas vans drove into the woods five to ten times a day, and camp commander Bothmann described summer 1942 as particularly successful, with 3,000 daily murders. With so many executions, the mass graves began to pose a problem. The inhabitants of the nearest villages complained of a terrible stench, so it was decided to dig up the thousands of corpses and burn them.

The Einsatzgruppen built incinerators in the forest to cremate the bodies. A Polish forester, who was shown around by Bothmann, also witnessed another of the Nazis' macabre tools: "The hollow, cylindrical bones which were not burnt were taken out and pulverised in a bone mill driven by a motor, which was

located in an especially built wooden barrack. I don't know where they took this bone flour. There must have been great quantities," explained the forester, who also saw Bothmann terrorising a Jewish forced labourer. The commander asked him to fetch a handful

of broken bones from the bone grinder, after which the Nazi snorted at the Jew: "These are members of your race."

Gas chambers shot up

Chełmno's methods of extermination inspired the Nazi leadership, so when Heydrich proposed the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" in 1942, it led to the creation of five more death camps in Poland and one in Belarus.

The idea of using gas as a method of execution had now been taken seriously by the Nazis' top people, but the limited capacity of the trucks was not sufficient for Heydrich. Instead, gas chambers with room for several hundred prisoners were to be built. Bodies were to be cremated on the spot to save time removing them.

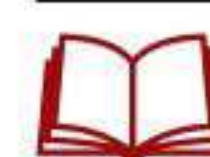
Such large gas chambers would take far too long to fill with exhaust gas from trucks, so the Germans started using the poisonous gas Zyklon B. Large diesel engines were mounted on the chambers, too, so cheap exhaust could continue to contribute to the extermination of Jews, Roma and others whom the Nazis considered inferior races.

By summer 1942, however, Heydrich had not abandoned the vans. One of the few surviving notes from the RSHA's technical department shows that an order for "30 special superstructures for chassis delivered was given to Gaubschat company" and "20 vehicles are already finished and have been delivered".

Including the prototype and the eight trucks delivered in 1940, the Nazis had about 60 vans by the end of 1942. But that number soon dropped dramatically.

With the German defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943, the fortunes of war, helped on by the Red Army, turned against the Nazis, so the Einsatzgruppen hastily had to destroy evidence of their misdeeds. As Soviet forces advanced on Germany, the Einsatzgruppen, it's assumed, blew up the death vans – none of them survived the end of the war. ■

FURTHER READING



● Patrick Montague: *Chełmno and the Holocaust: The History of Hitler's First Death Camp*, IB Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011 ● Holocaustresearchproject.org

Fate of gas truck proponents

Numerous Nazis were involved in the gas-van mass killings, but they destroyed the evidence or fled when Hitler's Germany fell, which allowed some to escape punishment after the war.



BOSSSES

HEINRICH HIMMLER AND REINHARD HEYDRICH

Titles: Commander of the SS and head of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA), respectively.

Roles: As the Nazi commanders responsible for the systematic massacre of Jews and the killing of Communists and Roma, the two orchestrated the use of gas trucks in Eastern Europe.

Legal consequences: Didn't appear in court.

Himmler committed suicide in May 1945, while Heydrich was killed by SOE agents in summer 1942.



ALBERT WIDMANN

Title: SS-Untersturmführer (equivalent to second lieutenant) and chemist in the RSHA's forensic department.

Role: During the war was involved in the testing of various gases for the death vans. He was in charge of the paperwork for ordering carbon monoxide for gassings.

Legal consequences: Sentenced to six and a half years in prison from 1959, when his role in Nazi war crimes emerged.

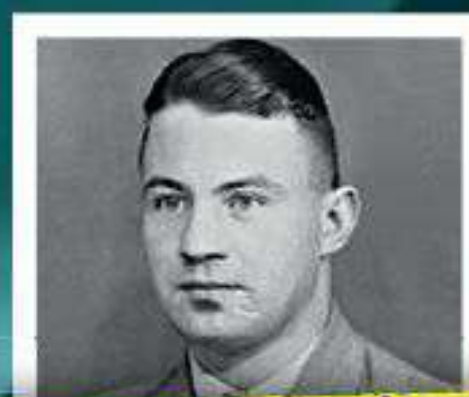


AUGUST BECKER

Title: SS-Untersturmführer and chemist in RSHA.

Role: Participated in development of the first death van and supervised trucks in the Soviet Union, where he made sure that the vans were developed further.

Legal consequences: Received three years in prison after the war due to his SS status and a ten-year sentence in 1959, when his leading role in the development of the death vans emerged.

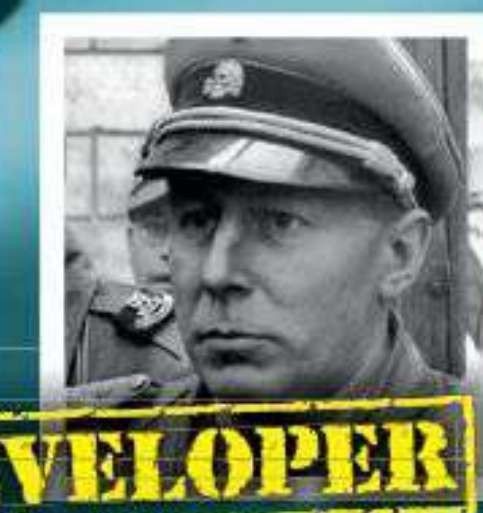


HERBERT LANGE

Title: SS-Sturmbannführer (equivalent to major) and commander of Chełmno death camp.

Role: The first officer to use death vans when he organised the killing of mentally ill patients. As commander of Chełmno death camp, he used gas trucks to kill prisoners.

Legal consequences: None. Herbert Lange died in April 1945 during the defence of Berlin.

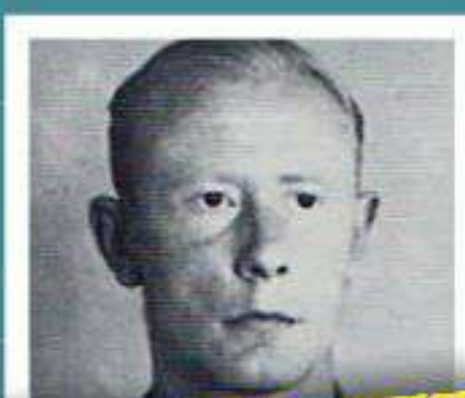


WALTER RAUFF

Title: SS-Standartenführer (equivalent to colonel).

Role: Leader of the entire RSHA programme of mobile gas chambers, and from 1941 had the final say when it came to the development and ordering of new gas trucks.

Legal consequences: Fled after the war to the Middle East and then to Chile. He was one of the most-wanted Nazi criminals, but died at large in Chile in 1984.



HANS BOTHMANN

Title: SS-Hauptsturmführer (equivalent to captain), succeeded Lange as commander of Chełmno camp.

Role: Responsible for the murder of more than 100,000 Jews before the death camp closed in January 1945.

Legal consequences: Hanged himself in a British internment camp in April 1946 before being convicted of his war crimes.

LENINGRAD

WAS STARVED TO

In September 1941, Adolf Hitler closed the iron ring around Leningrad. He wanted to wipe the Soviet city off the world map and starve its inhabitants to death. For almost 900 days, millions of people battled freezing temperatures and famine while bombs and shells rained down upon them.

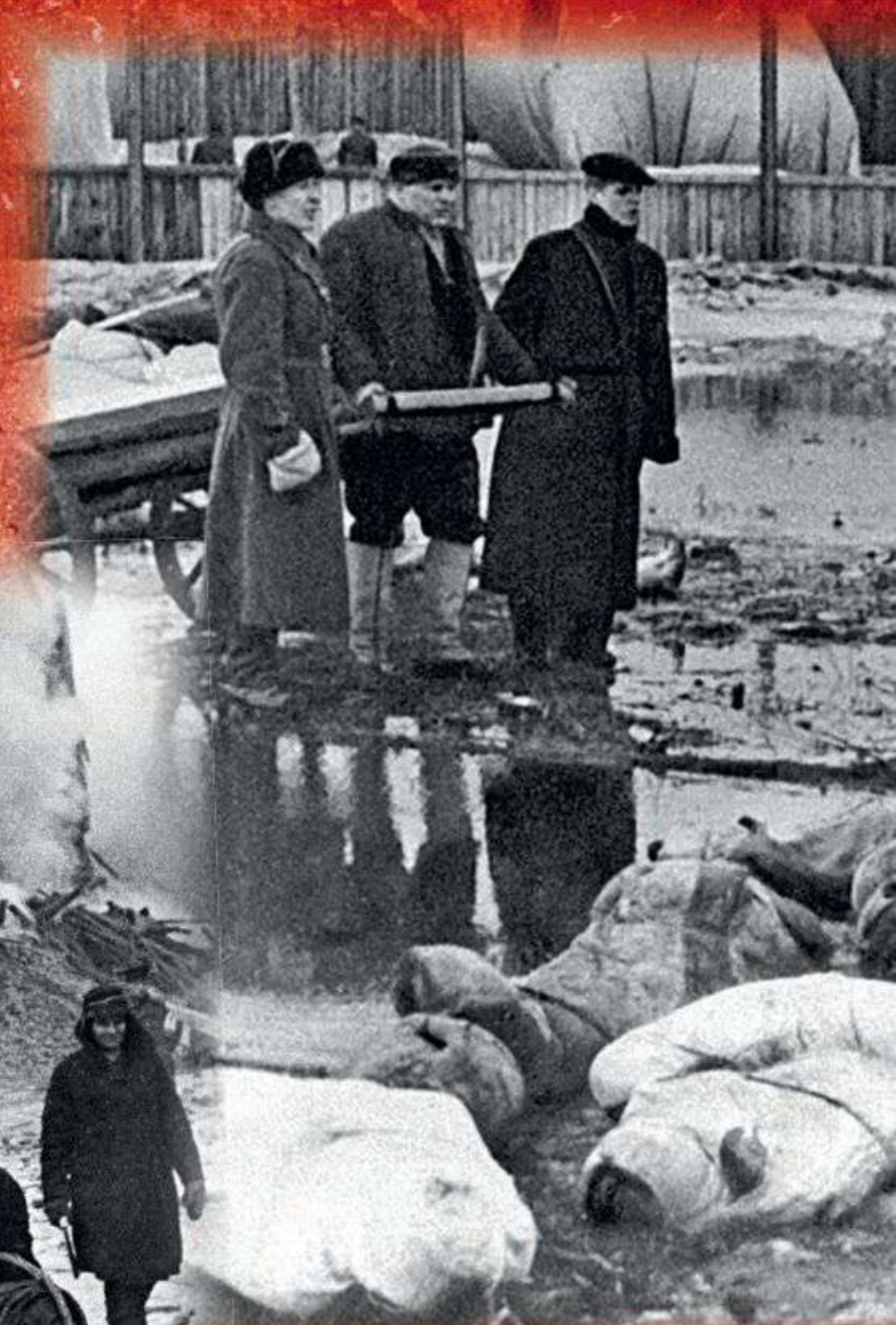
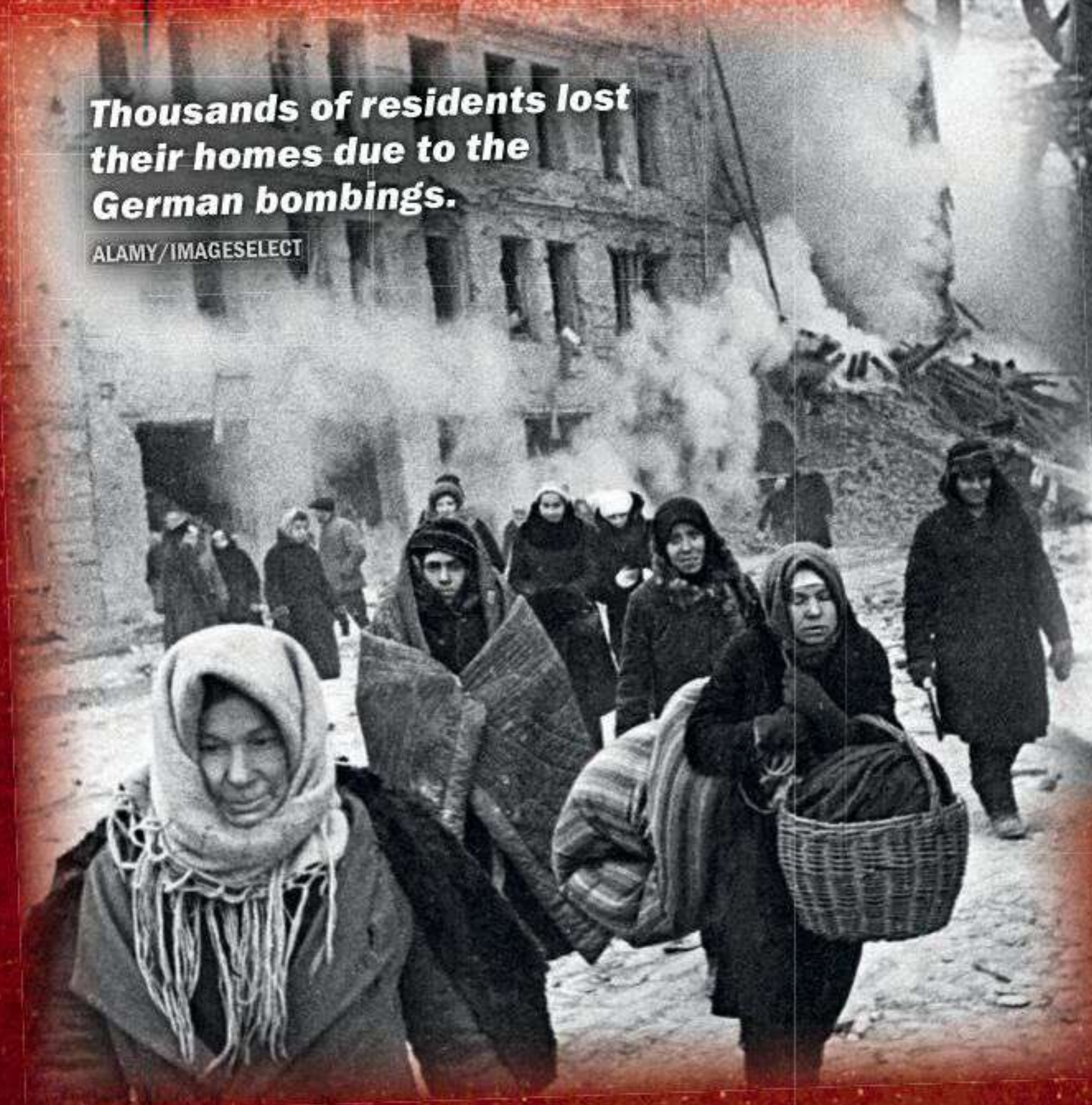
LENINGRAD/1941



The old capital of Peter the Great had been known as Leningrad since the Russian Revolution. Now, with a population of 3.3 million, it is the second largest city in the Soviet Union and a major centre for arms production.

Thousands of residents lost their homes due to the German bombings.

ALAMY/IMAGESELECT



GRAD

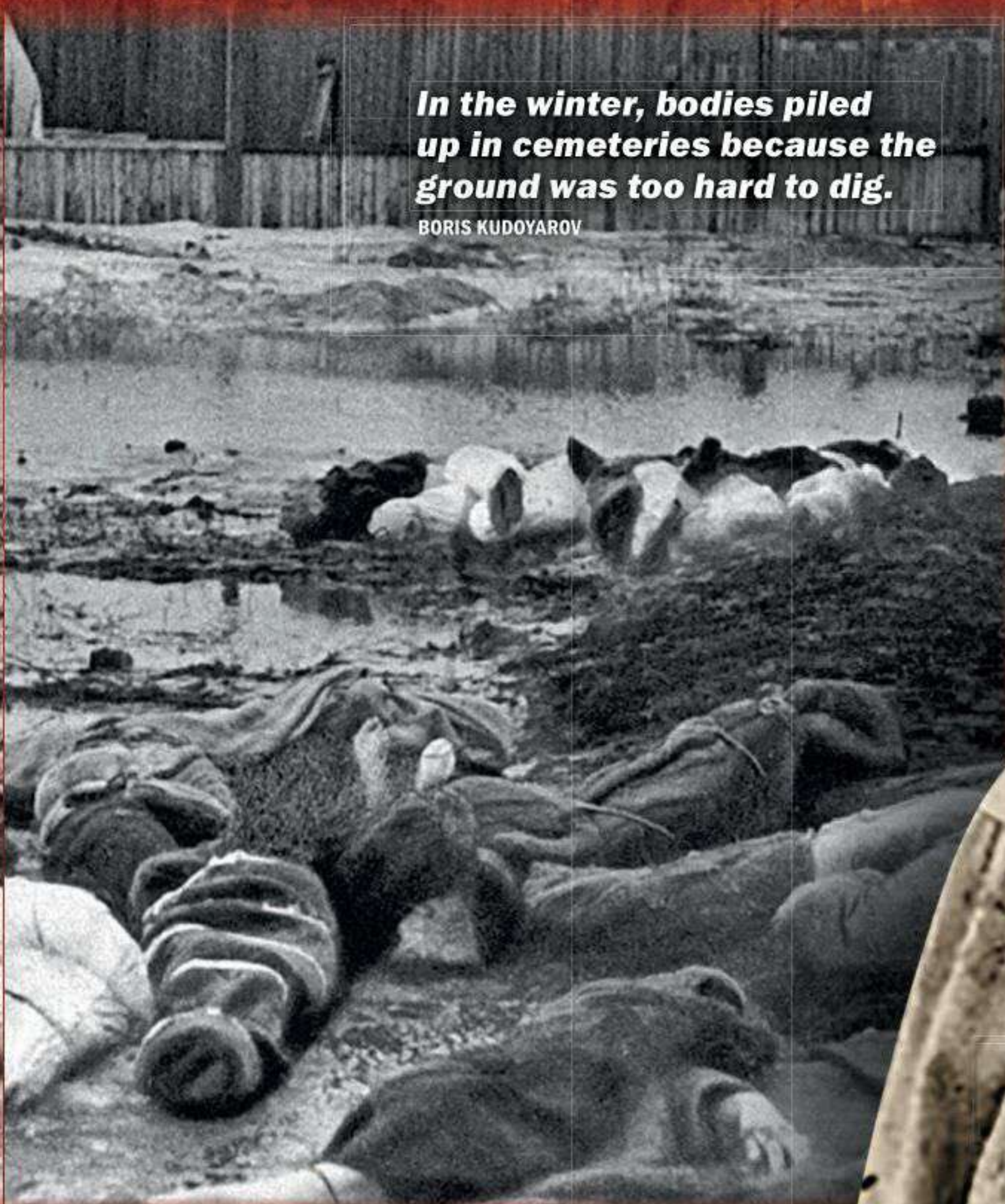
DEATH

In the winter, bodies piled up in cemeteries because the ground was too hard to dig.

BORIS KUDOYAROV

For 872 days, until the siege was broken, Soviet soldiers defended the city of Leningrad against German troops.

V. TARASEVICH / JOSHUA BARRETT



BY CLAUS CANCEL

In December 1941, the inhabitants of Olga Grechina's apartment block began to die of starvation. First the building's porter, then his wife. As ancillary workers, with no role in Leningrad's defence, their bread rations were just 125 grams a day – the equivalent of two slices of rye bread.

Then the gardener and the father of the disabled boy who lived in the flat above her perished. Olga herself received bigger rations, because she worked at an ammunition factory. She could eat all the soup she wanted in the canteen there. She was allowed to take food home to her elderly mother, too.

One evening, around 23.00, Olga's neighbour knocked at her door.

"My son is dying – I beg you, give me a spoonful of sunflower oil. If I pour it into his mouth I might be able to save him," the woman said.

"But I don't have any oil!" replied Olga.

"Yes you do, you must have! You have to save my son!"

Olga repeated that she didn't have any and closed the door. The next day, the boy was dead and Olga felt like a killer. She did have oil, but she was keeping it for her mother.

The city's houses collapsed, adding to the misery. German artillery guns fired every day, only stopping when the German bombers were on their way.

A few months after the siege began in September 1941, most power plants had run out of coal. The trams stood where they had been when the power went out and the streets were no longer cleared of snow. Instead, the exhausted residents had to tread small paths through the drifts to move between the bombed-out

Tragedies on the Eastern Front were closely followed by newspapers in the free world.

buildings. Eventually, corpses piled up along the paths.

"Today, as I made my way along the street, a man was walking ahead of me. He could barely put one foot in front of the other," Yelena Skryabina noted in her diary. "He sat on a fire hydrant. Suddenly his eyes rolled back, and then he slowly slipped to the ground. When I finally reached him, he was already dead."

Leningrad writhed in agony. And matters were only going to get worse in the years to come.

The Germans suffered no hardship

While the people died in droves inside Leningrad, the German soldiers in their trenches ten kilometres outside the city had plenty of food. Field kitchens supplied them with bread and hot soup made with beef or pork every day. Some of them kept the bread, which they knew they could barter for sex with starving local women in the hinterland.

Not only were the German soldiers aware that they were starving a million-strong city to death, but they also knew that their guns weren't only aiming at military targets. The maps used by German artillerymen clearly stated the function of their targets. Objectives 88 and 89, for example, were hospitals, objective 709 was a childcare institution, and objective

"The Crimea ... will be made accessible by means of an autobahn. [It] will be our German Riviera."

Adolf Hitler in a speech, 1941



736 was a crèche. All these targets were in line with Hitler's plans.

Wiped from the map

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union on 22nd June 1941, the plan for Leningrad was clear: the population would die. A few weeks after the start of the offensive, Hitler met with his closest officers and described his vision for captured territories in the east.

"The beauties of the Crimea ... will be made accessible by means of an autobahn. The peninsula will be our German Riviera," he explained. But the plans for the largest Soviet cities, Leningrad and Moscow, were completely different. They had to be razed to the ground and the populations exterminated; the new German overlords would not expend any energy on feeding those million-strong cities.

As Army Group North advanced rapidly towards Leningrad, the Red Army was paralysed. In 1937-1939, it had been

Battle for Leningrad

1941

22nd June

Germany breaks its pact with the Soviets and invades with 3.8 million soldiers.

8th Sept

Germans occupy Shlisselburg city on the southern shore of Lake Ladoga. Leningrad is surrounded.

10th Sept

Stalin designates General Zhukov as the new leader of Leningrad's defence.

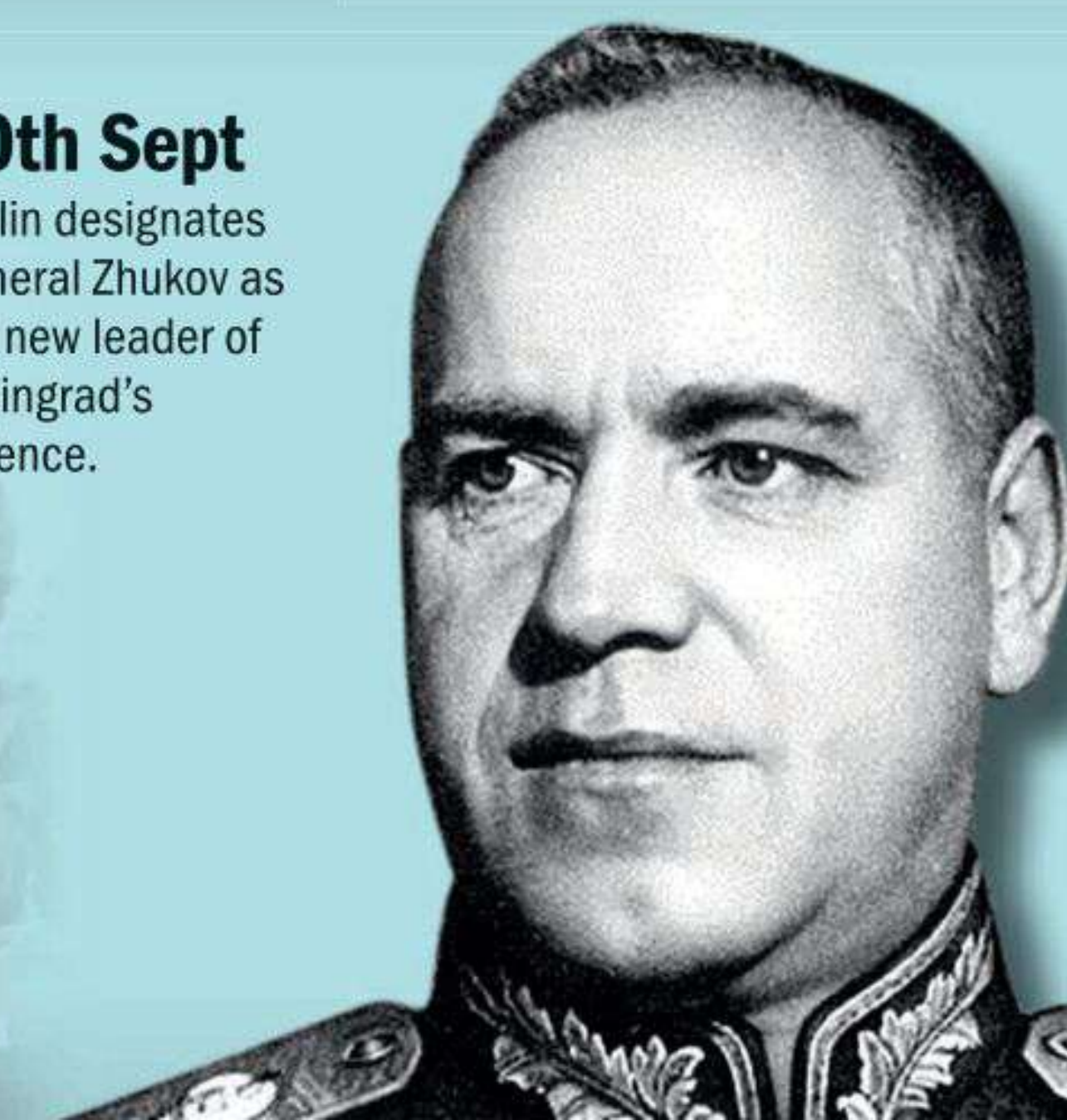
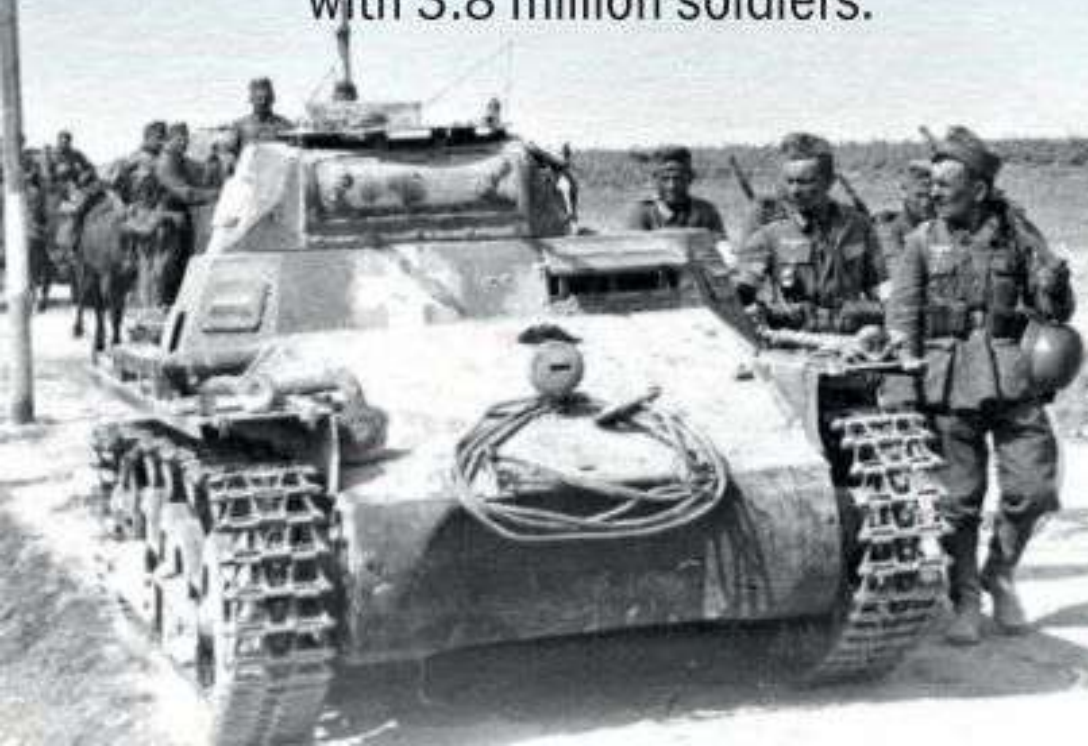
19th Sept

The German offensive stalls. The Germans dig in ten kilometres from the city.

8th Nov

In a speech, Hitler proclaims that the people of Leningrad must be starved to death.

Zhukov was one of Stalin's most successful officers.



purged of 40,000 officers whom Stalin had accused of treason. The authorities had shot 15,000, while the others were in prison camps in Siberia.

The Russian soldier Semyon Putyakov described the lack of good officers:

“Things are a total mess ... We are constantly moved from place to place. All we do is make dug-outs – we receive no proper training ... Finally our regiment has received a commanding lieutenant – Petrenko – but his orders leave even raw recruits totally exasperated. He lacks any real training ... and only gets in the way.”

As the Germans advanced, more accurate information found its way into the city. Thousands of civilians were deployed to dig trenches and tank traps around Leningrad. They talked to retreating Soviets and knew how quickly the Germans were advancing. They passed the news on to their families when they returned to the city. The situation seemed catastrophic.

City council rejected trains of food

However, the party leadership in Leningrad was more concerned with not losing face than with securing food for the population. As early as July 1941, Soviet Trade Minister Anastas Mikoyan sent several freight trains loaded with food to the city. Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, who was in charge of Leningrad's defence, responded by stopping the trains because he was afraid Stalin would hear that Leningrad could not fend for itself.

Food aid could have saved hundreds of thousands of people, but it was diverted to other areas of the Soviet Union. And that was not the only mistake that Voroshilov made. He had been a staunch supporter of Stalin since the Russian Civil War (1918–20), but in the fight against the German war machine, his strategic abilities fell short.

He spent far too much time forming a people's army made up of civilians ►

Finns wanted to recapture lost land

In 1940, Finland had to cede the Karelian Isthmus to Stalin.

Hitler's invasion of the USSR allowed the Finns to take revenge.

On 30th November 1939, Stalin invaded Finland but the Winter War did not go as expected. Although the Red Army had far more soldiers, tanks and planes than the Finns, the defenders held out for three and a half months.

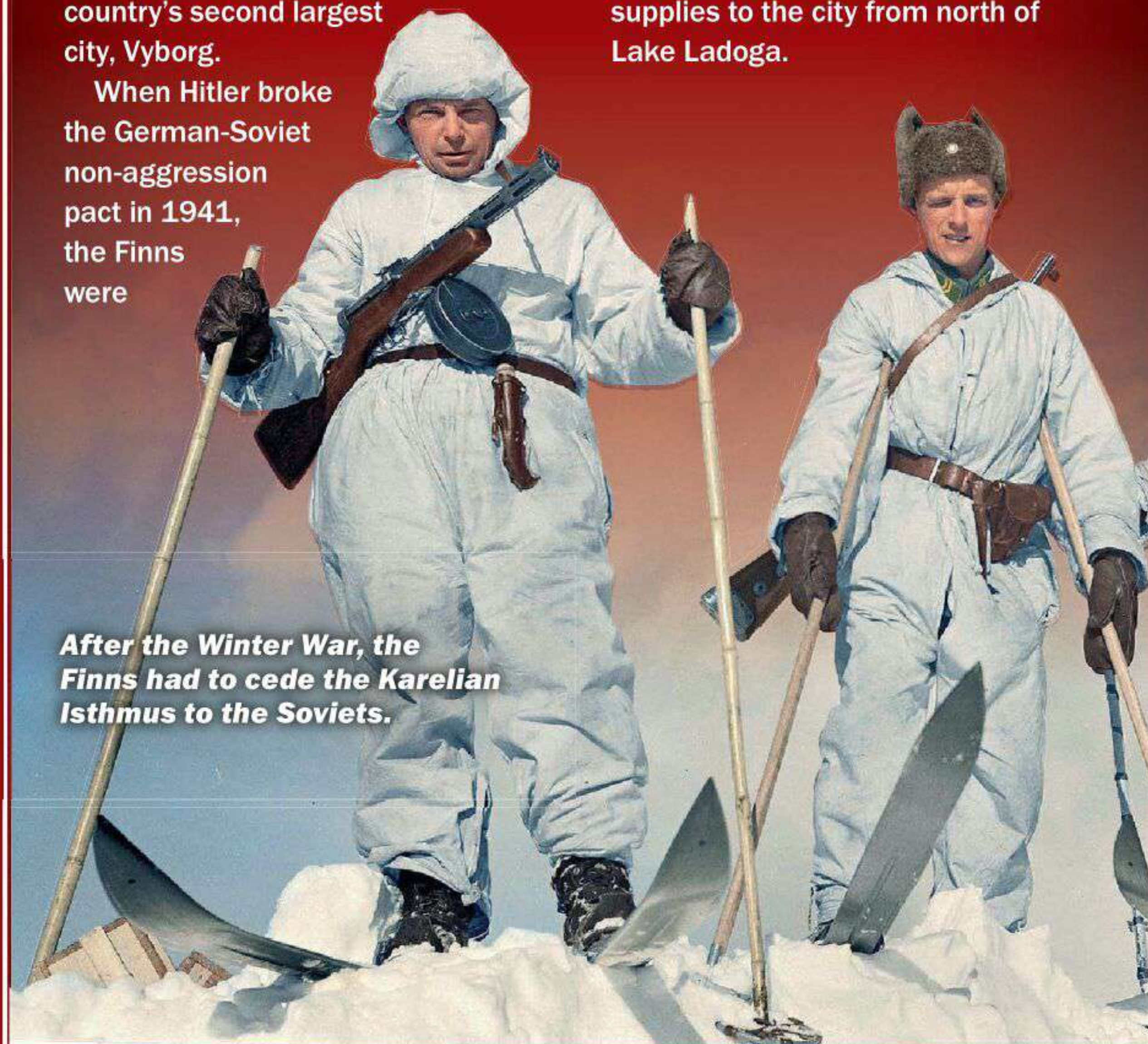
In the end, Stalin had to make do with capturing the Karelian Isthmus – land north of Leningrad, which housed a fifth of Finland's industry, a tenth of its agricultural land, and the country's second largest city, Vyborg.

When Hitler broke the German-Soviet non-aggression pact in 1941, the Finns were

more than happy to move in to win back the lost territory. While the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, the Finnish army moved into the disputed headland from the north.

The Finns recaptured land up to the old border, but then stopped so that their advance did not become part of Germany's war. Nevertheless, the Finnish offensive was part of the Germans' iron ring around Leningrad because it helped cut off overland supplies to the city from north of Lake Ladoga.

After the Winter War, the Finns had to cede the Karelian Isthmus to the Soviets.



TOPWAR.RU, MINISTRY OF DEFENCE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, GREGORY WEIL, GETTY IMAGES & TOPFOTO/POLFO

1942

26th Sept

The Soviets try to break the siege, but only succeed in capturing a bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Neva River.

1943

30th January

The siege is partially broken when the Soviets recapture the southern shores of Lake Ladoga. Supplies can be transported overland to Leningrad once more.

1944

14th January

The Red Army launches an offensive across the entire northern section of the Eastern Front to save the besieged city.

27th January

After almost two weeks of hard fighting, the siege of Leningrad is broken and the Germans are pushed back.



Besieged for 872 days

On 8th September 1941, the Germans closed the iron ring around Leningrad. From that point, the city's supplies had to be transported across Lake Ladoga. For the next two and a half years, Soviet and German soldiers fought for the city, while the civilian population froze and starved to death.

ALLAN HOJEN/HISTORIE



L a k e
L a d o g a

FINNISH-
OCCUPIED
TERRITORY

2 Finns attack

August 1941: The Finnish Army occupies the Karelian Isthmus, taking up a position 20 km north of Leningrad. Its advance cuts the city's overland supply route from the north.

4 Zhukov leads the defence

10th September 1941: General Zhukov takes over Leningrad's defence. He orders warships from the Kronstadt naval base to anchor close to the city, so that their guns can fire on the German positions.

3 The ring closes

8th September 1941: The Germans take Shlisselburg city on Lake Ladoga. The encirclement is complete; food can now only reach the city by water, across the lake.

G u l f o f
F i n l a n d

Kronstadt

LENINGRAD

Oranienbaum

Shlisselburg

Mga

GERMAN-
OCCUPIED
TERRITORY

5 Germans halt

15th September 1941: Hitler orders the 4th Panzer Army to join the attack on Moscow. The Germans find it more difficult to attack without them and the front line stabilises.

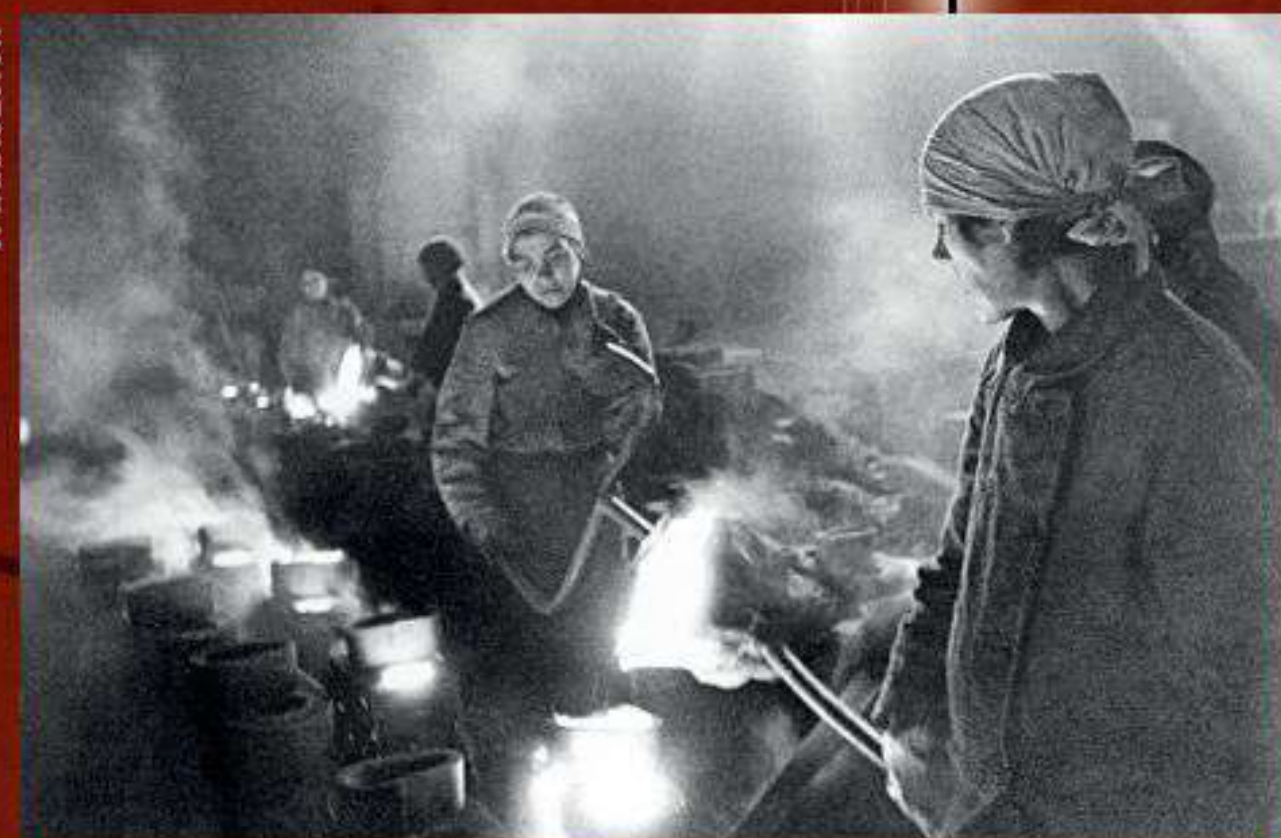
1 Hitler attacks the Soviet Union

22nd June 1941: After months of preparation, Hitler breaks his non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and invades the giant Communist state. The German army of 3.8 million men advances quickly in the first three weeks across three broad fronts. Leningrad is the target in the north, while to the south, the destination is Stalingrad and the oil-rich Caucasus.

Factories continued to operate

Leningrad had several factories that manufactured weapons and ammunition during the siege, including the Kirov factories that made the powerful KV-1 tank.

V. TARASEVICH



SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX



STATE MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF ST. PETERSBURG

"Road of Life" staved off famine

The Soviets were able to ship small quantities of food to the starving city from the eastern shore of Lake Ladoga, but when the lake froze in December, supply lorries could also drive there across the ice. Germany bombarded the route, which became known as the "Road of Life".

7 Land supplies re-established

January 1943: Soviet forces push the Germans back in Shlisselburg and from the shores of Lake Ladoga. This opens a narrow land corridor through which supplies can be routed.

6 Bloody battles on the River Neva

September 1941: The Soviets try to break the siege by establishing a bridgehead on the east bank of the Neva River. But the attack stalls and the Germans recapture the bridgehead in April 1942.

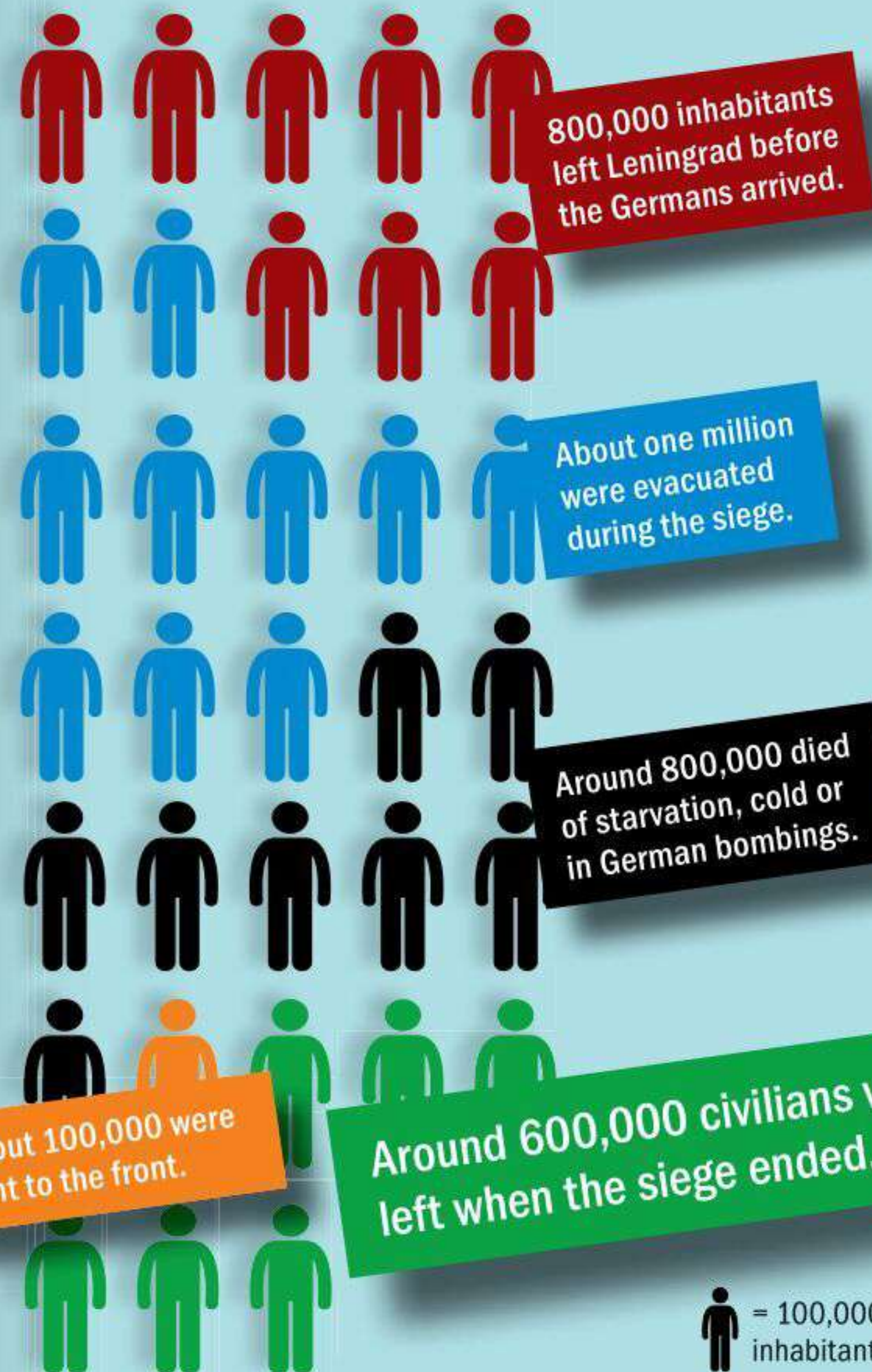
8 Germans abandon the siege

27th January 1944: Attacks across a broad front force the Germans to retreat. After 872 days, the siege of Leningrad is over.

German units reached Leningrad in just under three months, but they never captured the city.

Leningrad in numbers:

3.3 million people lived in the city



Soviet losses at Leningrad and across the rest of the German Army Group North front:

3,400,000

dead and wounded soldiers

German losses at Leningrad:

580,000

dead and wounded soldiers



from Leningrad and the surrounding area. The Soviet troops looked on in disbelief as columns of ordinary men and women were deployed to close the gaps at the front. Without training, they had no hope of withstanding German tank and air attacks. They died in droves.

Voroshilov also failed to understand the importance of coordinating artillery and infantry units, and often sent motley military forces forward in unprotected storms against German positions. They, too, were killed in their thousands.

That Voroshilov could not stop the Germans was clear in August 1941 after

the massacre on the Luga River, approximately 100 kilometres south of Leningrad, where Voroshilov tried to stop the enemy but found his defensive line along the river quickly overrun.

Voroshilov didn't launch an effective evacuation of Leningrad either, meaning that only 800,000 or so people reached safety before the Germans arrived.

Meanwhile, the Finnish army approached Leningrad from the north. The Finns weren't part of the German campaign; they just wanted to capture a piece of land lost to the Soviets during the Winter War the year before. But

their move meant that Leningrad's supply route from the north was cut.

When the Germans arrived on the shores of Lake Ladoga, east of the city, on 8th September, the iron ring finally closed around Leningrad. The Germans dug in for a siege. The encircled city still housed around 2.5 million inhabitants, including 400,000 children.

Hitler's aim was clear: "[A] large scale air attack on Leningrad will be carried out. It is particularly important in this connection to destroy the water supply."

The Führer wanted to deny the city's people anything they needed to survive, and soon the infrastructure for water and food distribution was burning.

Party comrades always had enough food

While children and the elderly received almost no nourishment, the city's Communist Party leaders didn't suffer any hardship.

Best chance of survival



Communist Party leaders, doctors, engineers and other high-ranking residents had the best chance of surviving. They received ample food from the scarce supplies that made it across Lake Ladoga throughout the siege.

Poor chance of survival



Office workers and other civilians who were not engaged in the city's defence or war effort were given a small rations allowance, and it was difficult for them to make it through the siege.

Good chance of survival



Military personnel and arms industry employees were fed at their workplace and given larger rations than the rest of the population.

Almost no chance of survival



Under 12s and the elderly were dispensable, according to the authorities, so were put on starvation rations that were insufficient to survive the cold.

Many children suffered from dystrophy, in which organ and body tissue wastes away due to lack of food.



TASS/POLIFOTO

Scientist calculated the numbers

The German army consulted scientists to calculate the length of time it would take Leningrad's inhabitants to starve. The army presented the leading researcher at the Institute of Nutrition in Munich, Ernst Ziegelmeyer, with details of the city's population and food situation, as well as the temperatures in winter.

Ziegelmeyer believed one winter of siege conditions would be enough. He concluded: "It is not worth risking the lives of our troops. The Leningraders will die anyway ... and then we will enter the city without trouble, without losing a single German soldier."

But Ziegelmeyer hadn't realised that the Soviets could transport food across Lake Ladoga. And while the Germans calculated what it would take to starve Leningrad's population to death, Stalin handed over the defence of the city to his best man, General Georgy Zhukov.

Following his appointment on 10th September, the general immediately changed the Soviets' tactics, including ordering warships in the Gulf of Finland closer to the city to provide artillery support. Suddenly, the Germans were meeting a different kind of resistance.

This prompted the Germans to focus entirely on starvation tactics. They regrouped while they waited, resting their soldiers after the long offensive through the western Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, Hitler decided to commit more forces to the attack on Moscow. Army Group North's most important armoured unit – 4th Panzer Army – was ordered to join the attack, which made offensives more difficult at Leningrad.

Zhukov took offensive action

Keeping the Germans in their trenches wasn't enough for Zhukov. Instead of

Everything was eaten in the besieged city

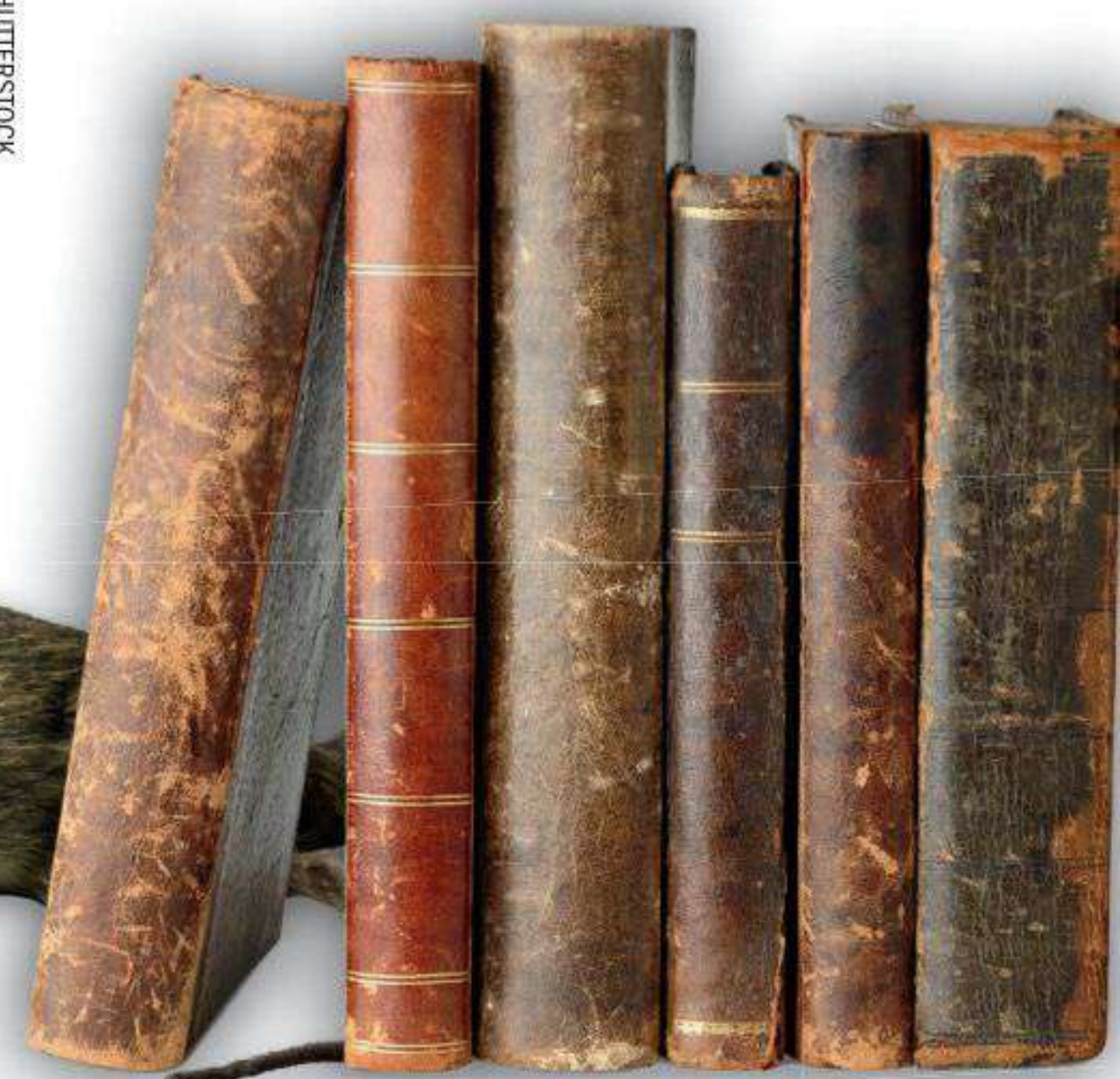
When the encircled inhabitants of Leningrad faced starvation, they resorted to desperate methods of survival.

- Dogs, cats, rats and other animals ended up on the dinner tables of homes.
- Dead family members were hidden. As long as the death wasn't registered with the authorities, the family could continue to use the deceased's ration card.
- Leather items were boiled for soup.

- Jewellery and silver cutlery were sold on the black market for a few slices of bread.
- People stole ration cards from corpses found on the streets.
- If inhabitants had the chance, they snatched other people's food rations.
- Parents ate their children's rations to survive themselves.
- Some of Leningrad's residents resorted to cannibalism.



SHUTTERSTOCK



evacuating the tormented population, he used his meagre forces in a series of fruitless attacks.

As radio operator Mikhail Neishtadt said, Zhukov "was a big theoretician and strategist – but he never seemed to care about human losses".

Nikolai Vavin discovered this firsthand. In late September 1941, he led a brigade towards the fortress island of Oreshek on Lake Ladoga. The island was close to the strategically important German-held city of Shlisselburg.

"Our force was sent across Lake Ladoga at 3pm – in broad daylight. Our guys didn't have a chance. The Germans quickly spotted us from the air – and it became a mass execution ... Out of my own landing group of 200 men, only 14 reached the shoreline," Vavin recalled.

Cannibalism became commonplace

While the fighting raged outside Leningrad, residents continued to die of hunger and cold inside the city. This was especially true in January and February 1942, when the city was plagued by

famine and over 100,000 people died each month.

In the evening, piles of corpses were transported on hand-drawn sledges to the cemeteries, but most had to be left in large piles as the frozen ground was too hard to dig.

Cases of cannibalism also began to be reported. Several corpses were seen in the street with missing arms or legs – and neighbours began to accuse each other of eating human flesh.

Maria Ivanovna, a housing administrator, witnessed one case. She was asked to check on a family after the mother began acting strangely. When she called, she noted that there were only two of the many children left.

"The rest have died," the mother explained, but she couldn't present any

death certificates. On the stove, a pot was simmering. The mother told her it was mutton, but when Ivanovna lifted the lid to ladle up the soup, she discovered a human hand.

Infants fell from exhausted arms

Despite the obvious food shortage, the evacuation of the city's civilians across the frozen lake did not begin until Stalin gave the green light in February 1942. However, a permit to leave the city did not ensure survival. The

trip across the lake was dangerous because there was nowhere to seek cover when German planes attacked.

"We would find clusters of corpses out on the frozen lake, still ►

"It is not worth risking the lives of our troops. The Leningraders will die anyway."

Ernst Ziegelmeyer, German researcher, 1941

Every day, the German bombings claimed new victims among the people of Leningrad.

TASS/POLFOTO



swaddled in shawls," said Olga Melnikova, a nurse who worked on the ice road. "We would carefully unwrap them and find babies, eight months to a year old, and little boys and girls. But we were never able to identify who they were."

Most of the evacuees travelling over the ice were so starved that they barely had the strength to move let alone hold on to their children when the lorries bumped over the frequent jolts in the icy

road. But the drivers refused to stop, even if children had slipped from their mothers' arms and out on to the ice. The danger of being hit by German bombs was simply too great if the lorry remained stationary.

Not all civilians were starved, however. Elena Kochina was evacuated in the same lorry as the son of a senior party member who had suffered no hardship. The son and his girlfriend boasted to Elena's husband of how well they'd

eaten since the siege had begun. "We ate whole boxes of butter and chocolate," the girlfriend said. "I didn't see any of that before the war." When asked why they wanted to leave, the son said: "I'm bored in Leningrad. There isn't anybody around to have a laugh with and I can't go out dancing anymore."

Food started to arrive

Just as the citizens of Leningrad were being transported out, food finally

Scale of disaster was concealed by Stalin

During the siege, many of Leningrad's inhabitants lived on the edge of starvation. When the war was over, Stalin tried to hide the appalling conditions by banning all talk of the famine.

It was no secret among the city's inhabitants that Stalin and the Communist Party were almost as guilty of causing their suffering as Hitler's troops.

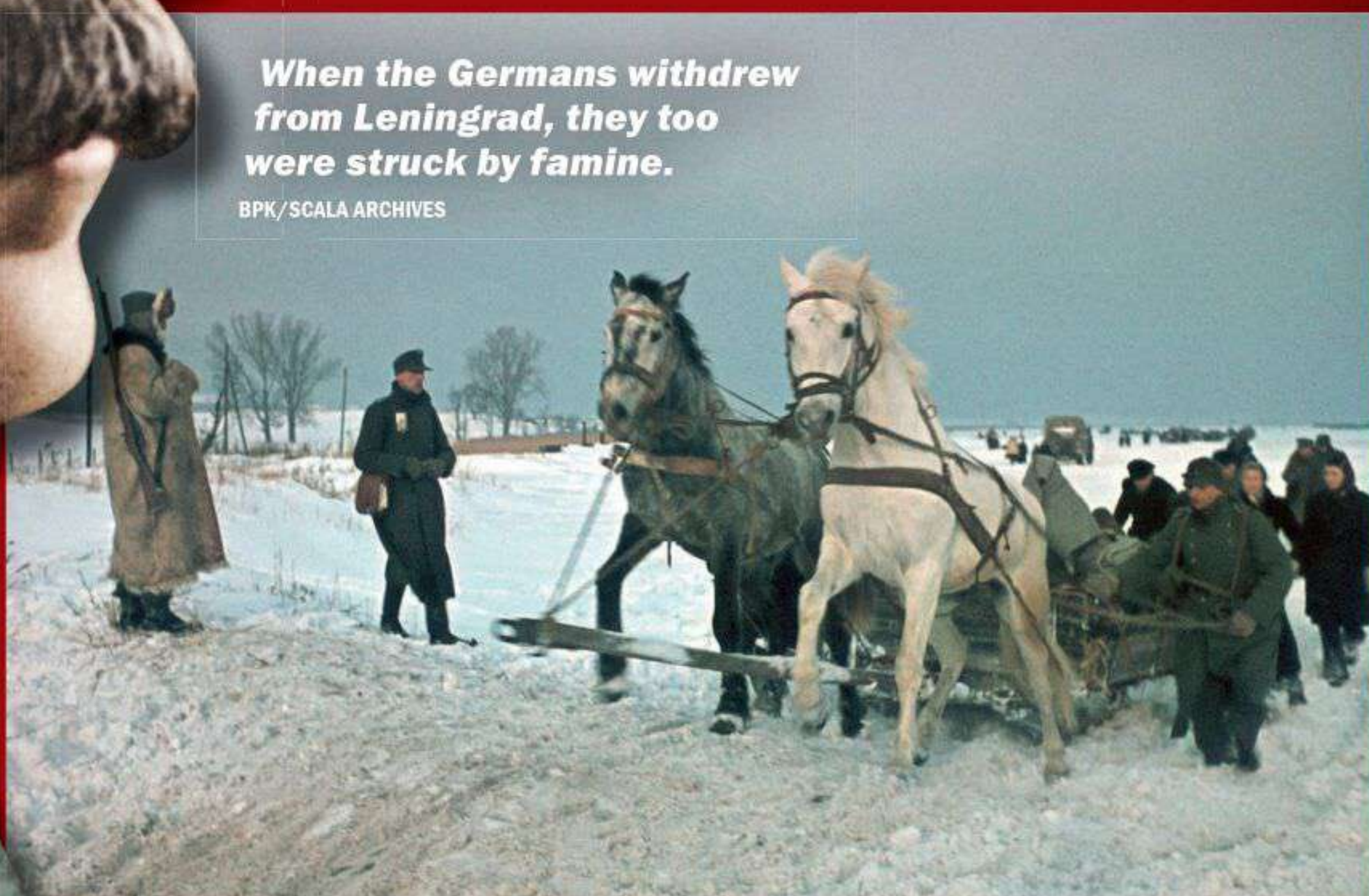
They had seen with their own eyes how the party bosses had lived like kings while they themselves starved. Likewise, the inhabitants blamed the party for not arranging an evacuation before the Germans arrived. They believed that they

had survived in spite of the Communist Party. For Stalin, therefore, it was crucial that the truth be kept hidden.

Afterwards, the city opened a museum to commemorate the nearly 900-day nightmare. But Stalin shut it down immediately. He also banned books on the subject or any talk of suffering. No one was allowed to publish pictures showing more than three dead. The Red Army's heroic defence of the city was the only subject permitted.

When the Germans withdrew from Leningrad, they too were struck by famine.

BPK/SCALA ARCHIVES



Stalin closed Leningrad's siege museum to conceal the circumstances of the city's famine.

started to flow in to the city. In the beginning, only party leaders and other privileged people benefited from the new supplies, but slowly bread rations were increased and there were more goods in the shops.

The city had survived the worst period of the siege. In March 1942, the monthly death toll dropped to fewer than 100,000, and after 15th April, the trams finally began running again.

"One morning we all heard the sound of a tram bell clanging. There was a gasp of astonishment, and then everyone who could move got over to the window, some crawling on their hands and knees," said Vera Pavlova, a nurse at one of the city's hospitals. "The tram that had stood on Bolshoi Prospect all winter was now sailing past us. If only you could have seen the joy there was in that room! People came back to life, shouting to each other in their happiness: 'Lads, it's victory, it's victory!'"

Soviets upset the Germans' plans

In late summer 1942, the Germans decided to finish Leningrad once and for all – the lengthy siege of the city was tying up too many soldiers that were needed elsewhere.

Moreover, their starvation tactics had been thwarted by the "Road of Life" across Lake Ladoga. But the planned offensive never got under way. Before the Germans were ready, Soviet troops launched a fierce offensive aimed at breaking the siege by capturing the occupied shoreline around Lake Ladoga.

All German forces now had to be deployed to defend the strip of land that they could scarcely hold. Although the Soviet attack failed, it effectively quashed the Germans' plan to capture Leningrad.

Six months later, the Soviets tried once again. By this point, it was the Germans who were suffering from a lack of supplies, and this time around the Red Army's attack succeeded.

MICHAEL SAVIN



The Soviets used to bury dead German soldiers with their heads in the snow.

In 1941, the Germans celebrated being just 10 km from Leningrad. Two years later, they had not advanced any closer to the city.



SZ PHOTO/SCAMPX

On 18th January 1943, the Soviets were able to push the Germans away from the shores of the lake. This gave them control of a narrow land corridor through which they could bring supplies.

This, combined with the fact that many of the city's inhabitants had finally been evacuated, made the winter of 1943 a little easier for Leningrad's residents. The fortunes of war were about to turn.

The Germans fled

In January 1944, the siege was finally broken when Soviet forces again attacked the German troops and finally sent them packing.

"The staff gathered together ... People brought out vodka," Olga Grechina recalled. "[W]e sang, cried, laughed; but it was sad all the same – the losses were just too large. A great work had ended ... we all felt that ... But we also felt confusion. How should we live now? For what purpose?"

Olga's doubts were well founded. Sure,

the Germans were gone, and the reconstruction work was slowly under way, but the city's inhabitants wanted, or perhaps needed, official recognition of

"We would find clusters of corpses on the frozen lake ... babies, eight months to a year old."

Olga Melnikova, Russian nurse, 1942

their suffering. It wasn't to be. Stalin's grip on Leningrad was at least as firm as the Germans' had been. He was determined to suppress knowledge of what the population had suffered during the siege. Thus, diaries and paintings recounting the hardships the city's inhabitants had endured were censored and banned.

The only story Stalin wanted published was the one about how bravely the Red Army had fought. The rest of the Soviet Union remained ignorant of the hundreds of thousands of people who'd lost their lives due to the incompetence of party leaders. And the survivors of Leningrad could only share their tale of woe with one another. ■

FURTHER READING



• Michael Jones: *Leningrad – State of Siege* John Murray, 2008 • Brian Moynahan: *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, Quercus, 2014



Everything froze during the ships' perilous journey north. If a sailor put his bare hand on a metal rail, his skin would instantly become stuck.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM & AP/POLFO
& SHUTTERSTOCK



For four years, Allied sailors carried supplies to the Soviet Union through one of the world's coldest sea lanes. Along the way, they were attacked by U-boats, aircraft and warships. The worst enemy, however, was the -50 degree Celsius temperatures.

CONVOY THROUGH ICY HELL



NORTH ATLANTIC/1941

In June 1941, Nazi Germany invades the Soviet Union, breaking its non-aggression pact. The attack is so devastating that the British fear the Red Army will collapse, enabling Hitler to concentrate all his forces on the west.



The torpedo hit the steam merchant SS *Induna* at 07.20 on 30th March 1942. The British ship had spent the previous days – along with 18 other cargo ships in convoy PQ 13 – fighting its way through the icy Barents Sea on its way to the Russian port of Murmansk. German aircraft had twice attacked the ship, but had been forced away by *Induna's* anti-aircraft gun. The ship was just 300 kilometres from safety when the U-boat hit it.

The torpedo burst through the ship's iron hull and ignited the fuel above hold number five. A massive pillar of fire rose into the air, instantly incinerating those sleeping in the cabins above. The explosion knocked over engineering officer William 'Bill' Short, who had just started his watch. He got to his feet and, finding the lifeboats had already launched, leapt into the icy waves. The cold instantly drained the engineer's warmth, but strong hands grabbed him at the last moment and hauled him into a lifeboat.

There were 32 men packed into the overcrowded boat. Their teeth were chattering and they had ice in their hair and beards. The *Induna* had fallen far behind the convoy before the attack, so no one came to the rescue. The first night, seven men died in the freezing

cold. Six of the bodies were thrown overboard. The seventh – the body of a burned engineer – could not be moved. According to Short, he was "frozen to the bottom of the lifeboat and it was impossible to remove him".

The boat's fresh water supply had also frozen, so the men had to take turns licking the ice. For four days, the boat drifted until a Russian minesweeper found it on the fifth day. By then, 15 men in the small boat had perished. Two more died in hospital. In

Death came in a few minutes

The sea temperature in the Barents Sea, where the convoys sailed, was around zero degrees. Sailors who ended up in the icy water often died within minutes.

After 2 minutes

At a sea temperature of **zero degrees**, the victim effectively lost the ability to use his hands, arms and legs within just two minutes.

15 minutes

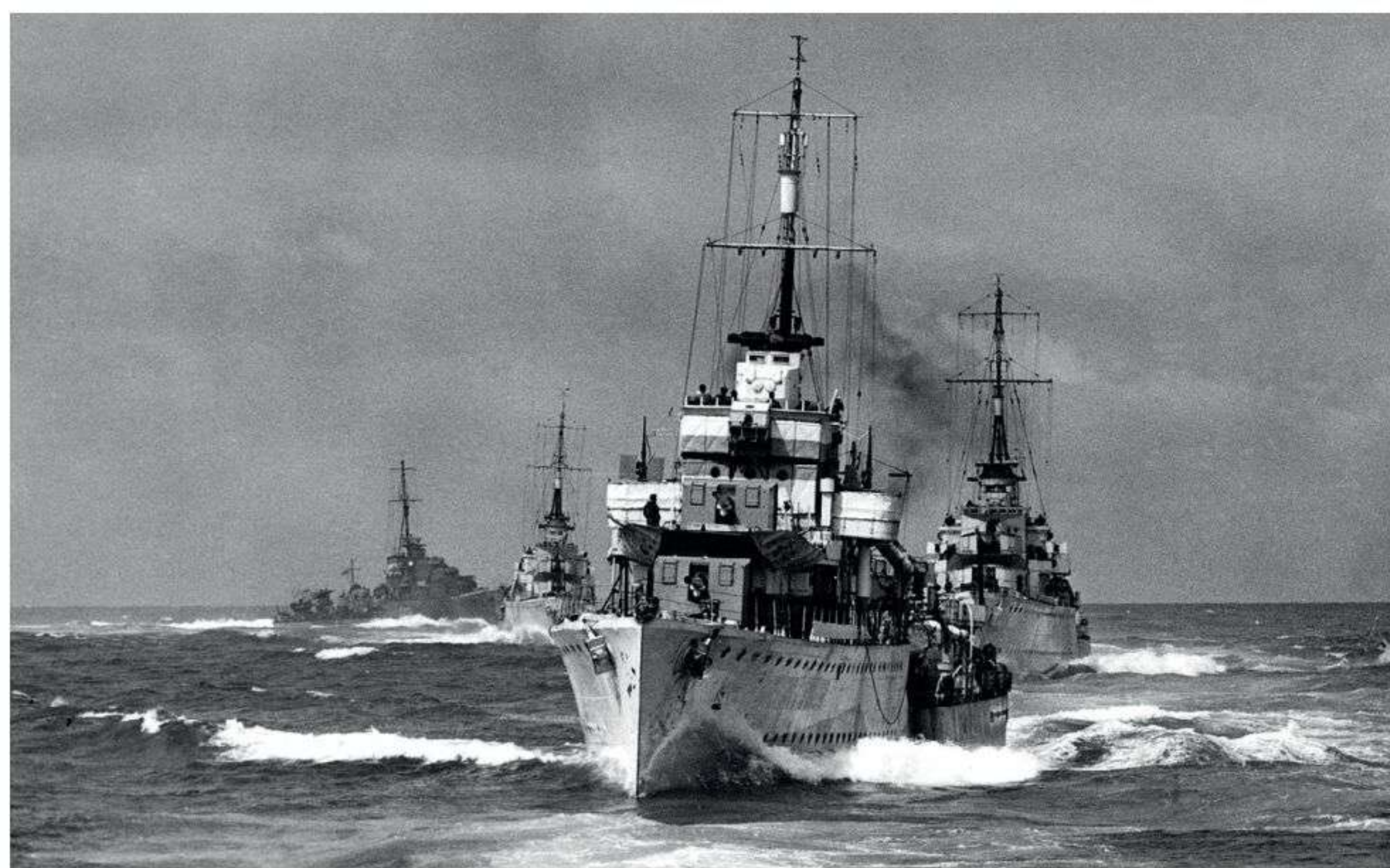
The body's core was now so cold that the victim usually lost consciousness. If he wasn't wearing a life jacket, he'd drown.

15–45 minutes

After 15–45 minutes (maximum) in the icy water, the body had lost so much heat that the victim died of a heart attack or respiratory arrest.



SHUTTERSTOCK



TOP PHOTO: POLYFOTO

The convoys were escorted by warships that tried to keep German bombers and U-boats at bay. The destroyers were particularly effective against the submarines.

Murmansk, doctors amputated both of Short's legs, which had become gangrenous in the cold. Their quick actions saved his life.

Thousands of his colleagues were not so lucky. The Arctic convoys that ferried supplies to the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1945 were the most dangerous convoys to sail in World War II. Sailors battled not only U-boats, planes and warships, but also extreme cold and tonnes of ice. At least 3,000 sailors died making the trip, which Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill called "the worst journey in the world".

Soviet defiance was essential

The Arctic convoys were born of desperation. After subjugating most of Europe, Hitler's war machine rolled into the Soviet Union in June 1941. German troops seemed unstoppable, and in Britain, Churchill feared the Soviets would surrender.

If that happened, Germany would not only be able to transfer all its forces to the Western Front, but the Nazis would also have access to vast quantities of raw materials that could make the Third Reich virtually invincible. Churchill therefore decided that the Soviets should be supported with supplies "at all costs". As the Nazis controlled large parts of North Africa



and the Mediterranean, there was no way through from the south. The only solution was to send convoys through the Arctic Circle to the Soviet ports of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk.

The first convoy, Operation Dervish, sailed on 21st August 1941. It consisted of just six cargo ships, with nine warships for protection. Like most of the following convoys, the ships, which came from several nations, gathered at Hvalfjörður in Iceland. From there they sailed for Arkhangelsk loaded with 15 Hurricane fighters and 10,000 tonnes of rubber. The outward journey was peaceful, as was the return.

"There was no real threat from the enemy at this stage of the war," recalled seaman John Squires, who served on one of the convoy's destroyers. The following transports, now designated PQ for outgoing convoys and QP for the return leg, didn't experience frequent attacks, either. But Convoy PQ 8, which left Iceland on 8th January 1942, got a chilling taste of how deadly the icy waters were. The day before the convoy reached Murmansk, the destroyer *Matabele* was torpedoed by a U-boat. Although a rescue ship arrived within minutes, only two men from a crew of over 200 were rescued from the sea. The rest froze to death.

In the spring of 1942, the Germans began to feel the effects of the military supplies pouring into the Soviet Union via the Arctic convoys. On 14th March 1942, Adolf Hitler designated the convoys as a strategic target of vital importance and declared that the "maritime communications over the Arctic Ocean between the Anglo-Saxons and Russians, [which were] hitherto virtually unimpeded, should henceforth be impeded".

Ice covered everything

The Germans had occupied Norway in 1940, gaining access to ports and airfields, which they now exploited in the fight against the Arctic convoys. Large warships, including the dreaded battleship *Tirpitz*, gathered in the fjords. U-boats set sail from Norwegian harbours, and fighters and bombers took off from the country's airfields, the northernmost of which were only 80 kilometres from Murmansk – all in pursuit of Churchill's Arctic convoys.

PQ 13, which departed Iceland on 21st March 1942, was one of the first ►



Enemy attacked from the air and the deep

Ships carrying supplies to Russia were chased by an unrelenting enemy of submarines, bombers and warships.

The convoy route to Murmansk and Arkhangelsk in Russia was the most dangerous supply line in World War II. The Germans had air and naval bases in northern Norway from where they could easily send U-boats, ships and aircraft against the convoys.

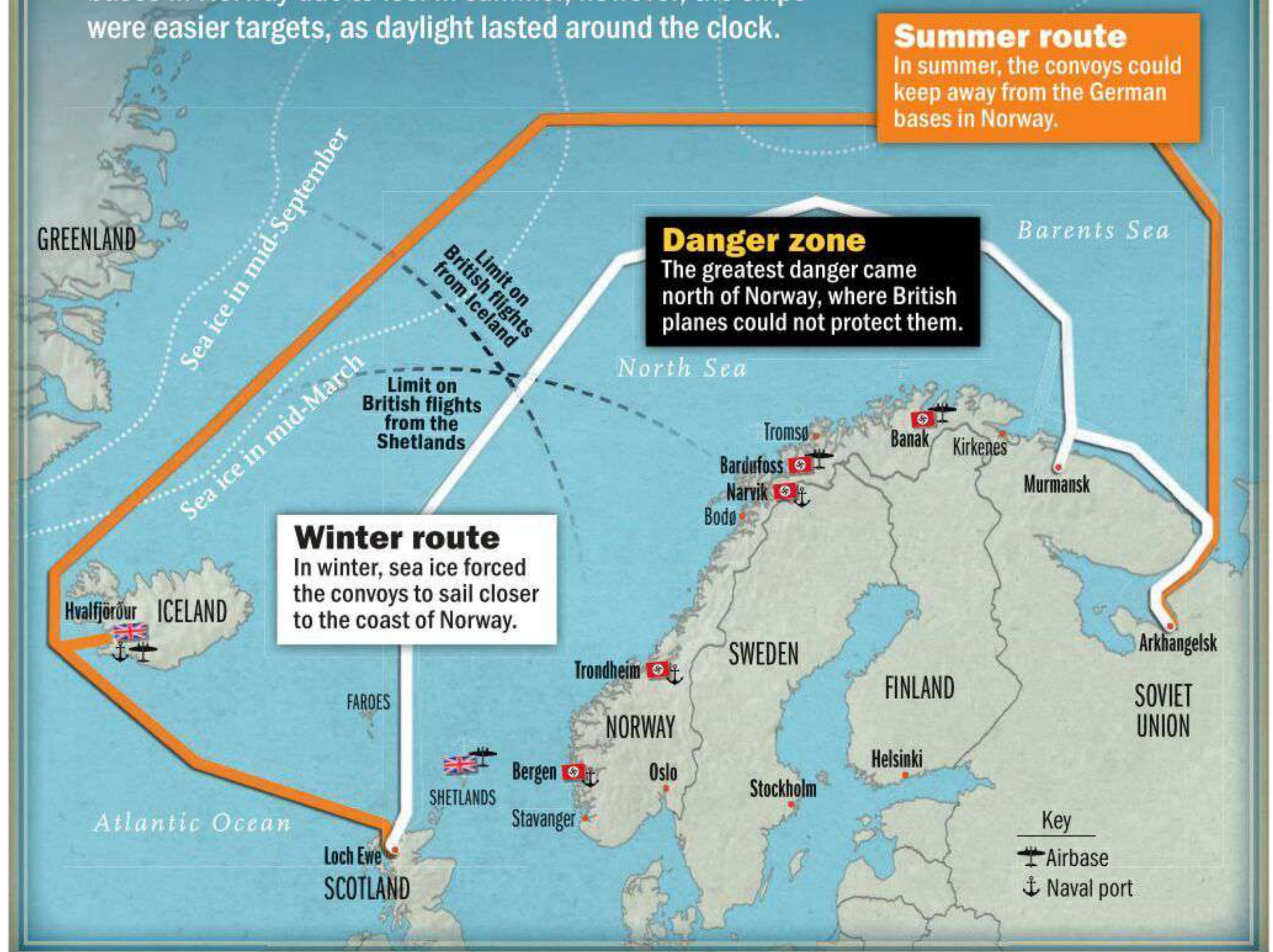
In the summer months, when the ice sheet was at its thinnest, the convoys sailed in a wide arc around Norway to try to avoid detection by German aircraft. In winter, however, the sheet ice forced the convoys closer in towards

the coast, where the Germans could find them more easily.

The most dangerous part of the route was north of Norway, where British aircraft could not provide cover. Out there, the warships were the only defence. On the cargo ships, the sailors slept fully clothed, near the deck, because a torpedo could sink them in minutes. But sailors on the tankers carrying fuel could sleep deep inside the ship without a stitch on. If they were hit, they would be wiped out in seconds.

4,000-kilometre gauntlet

In winter, the convoys had to sail close to the German bases in Norway due to ice. In summer, however, the ships were easier targets, as daylight lasted around the clock.



Hunt in the Arctic Sea

Two groups of warships protected the convoy. The distant escort defended the cargo ships against larger warships. The close escort lay in a protective ring around the convoy and searched the sea with radar and sonar to locate submarines. If attacked, one or more warships from the escort would be sent out to chase the attacker, while the rest of the convoy changed course.

Distant escort



Defence against warships

The distant escort sailed further out from the convoy. It consisted of large battleships and only went into action if German warships appeared.

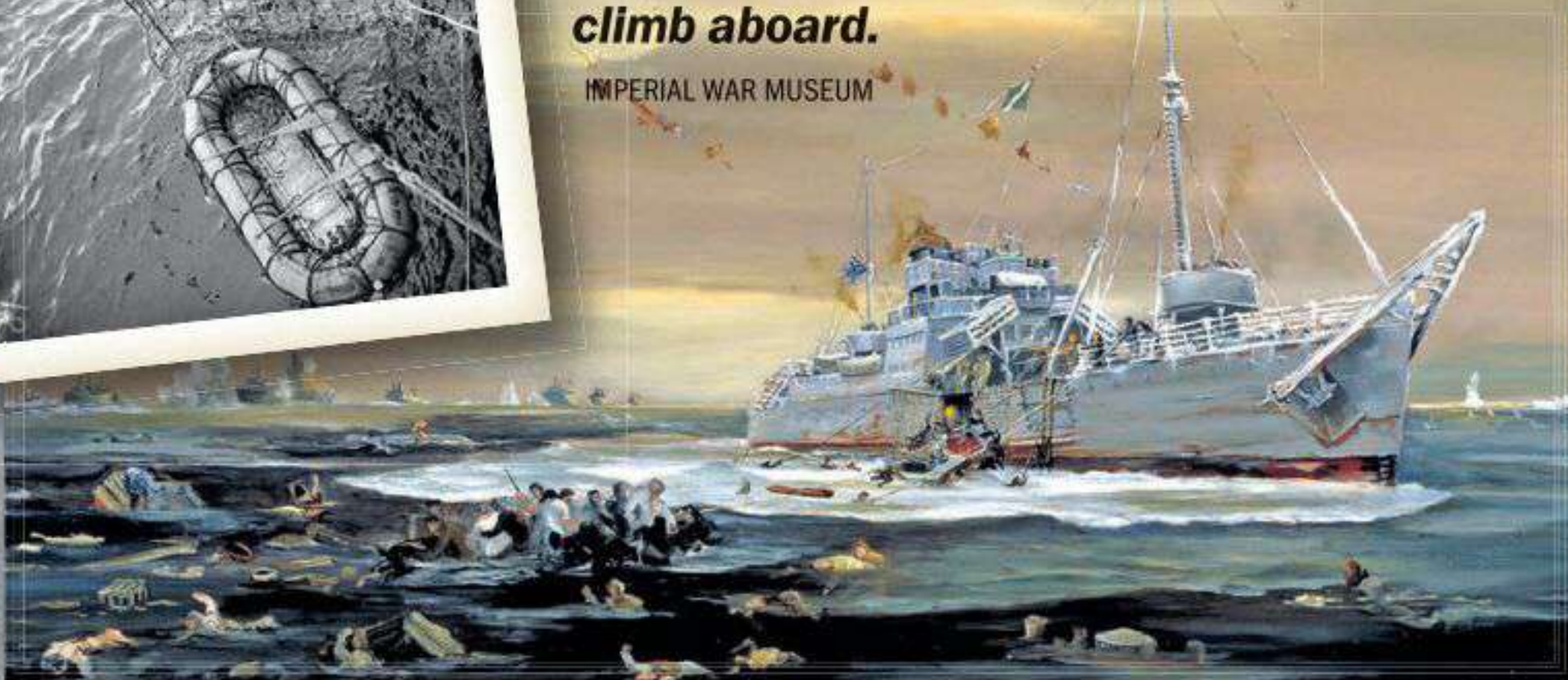


Bone collectors had the convoy's most dangerous job

The convoys were accompanied by rescue ships, known as bone collectors, which were designed to collect survivors from ships that sank en route. The bone collectors, usually old converted freighters, were the most vulnerable vessels in the convoy. In the event of a sinking, they had to stop while the other ships continued. The ship was therefore an obvious target for U-boats and aircraft. Together, the bone collectors saved thousands of lives. The most successful was the *Zamalek*, which accompanied 68 convoys, including PQ 17, and saved a total of 665 lives.

The rescue ships were equipped with nets that survivors used to climb aboard.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM



Destroyer



U-boat's nightmare

Strength: Fast and difficult to sink

The destroyer's task was to protect the convoy and hunt down U-boats. Heavily armed, it could sail at around 35 knots and was one of the most deadly ships in the escort. Its shallow draught made it hard to sink by torpedo.

Convoy formation:

As most U-boats attacked the convoys from the side, the freighters sailed in a 'broad front' formation. In this way, the convoy passed the danger more quickly and the subs had fewer targets.

Corvette

Destroyer escort

Trawler

Corvette



Emergency hack

Strength: Very strong

The corvettes were built at the start of the war as a stopgap measure until better ships were available. The wide hull made the corvette stable but slow. At 16 knots, it was no match for the German U-boats, which sped along at 17-18 knots.

Air defence ship

Converted cargo ships with anti-aircraft guns accompanied the convoy.

Corvette

Trawler

Trawler



Fishing boats joined the convoys

Best in: Rough weather

Trawlers were converted fishing vessels that helped fight submarines. They had deck guns, sonar and depth charges. Trawlers were suitable for rough weather, but most could only sail at around 12 knots.

CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIE & ALAMY/IMAGESELECT

Destroyer escort



Assembly line warship

Special features: Cheap and efficient

Destroyer escorts were built specifically for convoy service. At 21 knots, the ship was slower than a destroyer, but it was cheap to build. Over 500 were built during the war.

Destroyer
Escort leader

Destroyer

Leader of the
cargo ship convoy

Destroyer

Corvette

Destroyer
escort

Vulnerable ships

The cargo ships that sailed with ammunition and fuel were protected inside the convoy.

Trawler

Cargo ship convoy

Air
defence
ship

Rescue ships

Destroyer
escort

CAM ship

As a replacement for real aircraft carriers, selected cargo ships were equipped with catapults capable of launching a single fighter.

Trawler

Sloop

Minesweeper

Minesweeper

Minesweeper

Sloop

Minesweeper

Convoy's workhorse

Strength: Very versatile

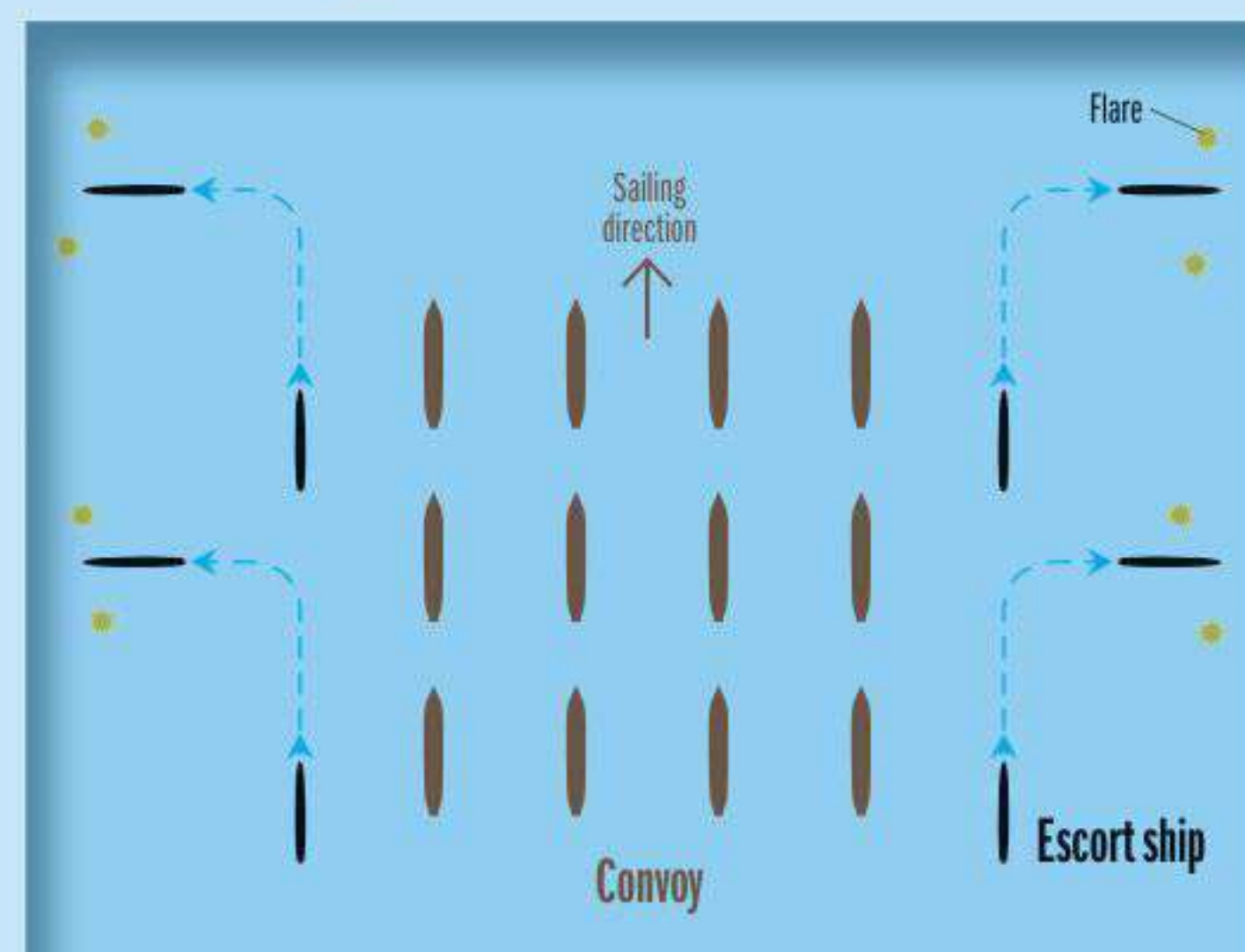
The minesweeper's primary task was to clear mines, but the ship was also equipped to hunt submarines.

U-boat tracker

Strength: Long range

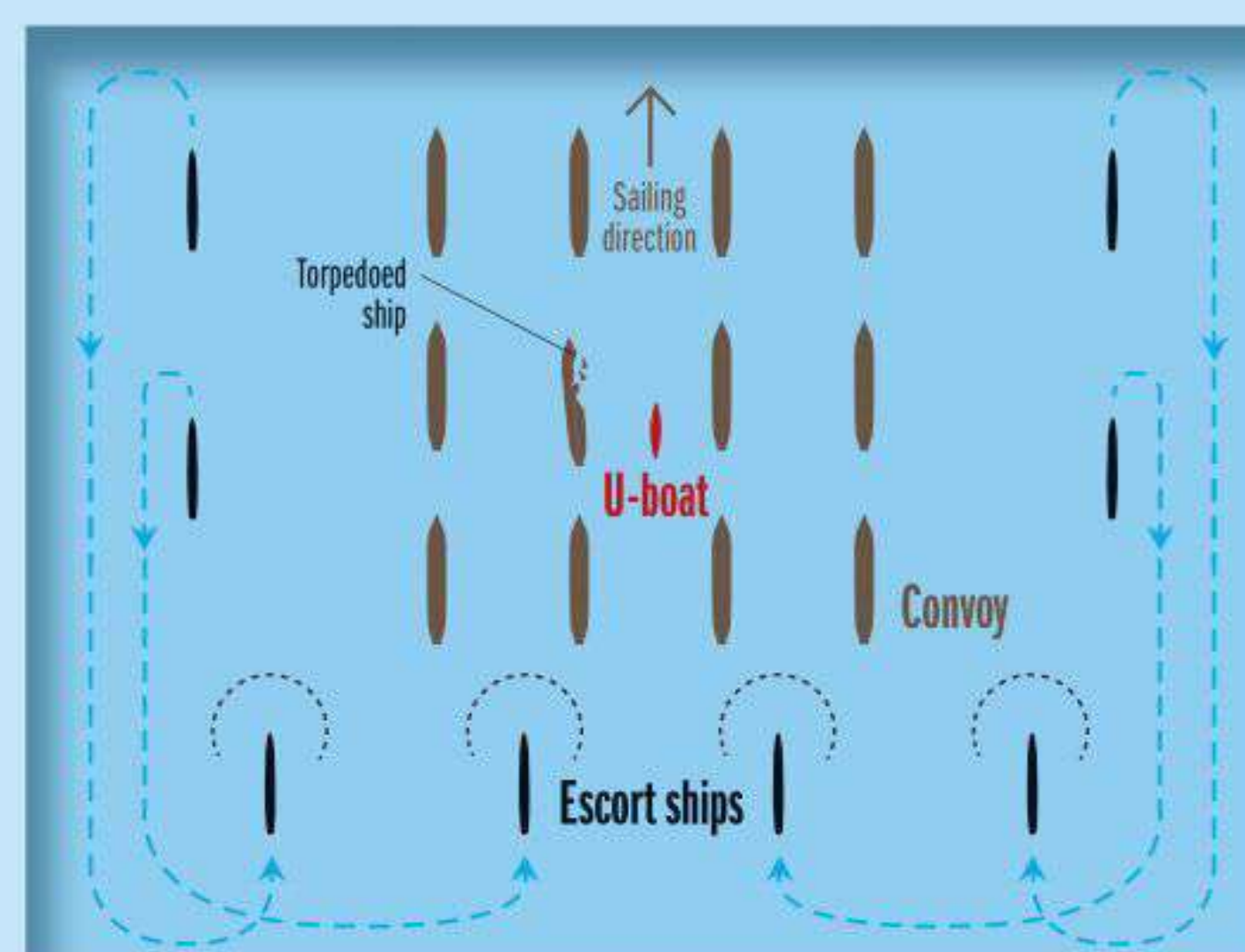
The sloop was lightly armed but well equipped with depth charges and submarine tracking equipment. With a top speed of 19 knots, the ship was slower than a destroyer, but it had a longer range.

Escort's strategy against the U-boats



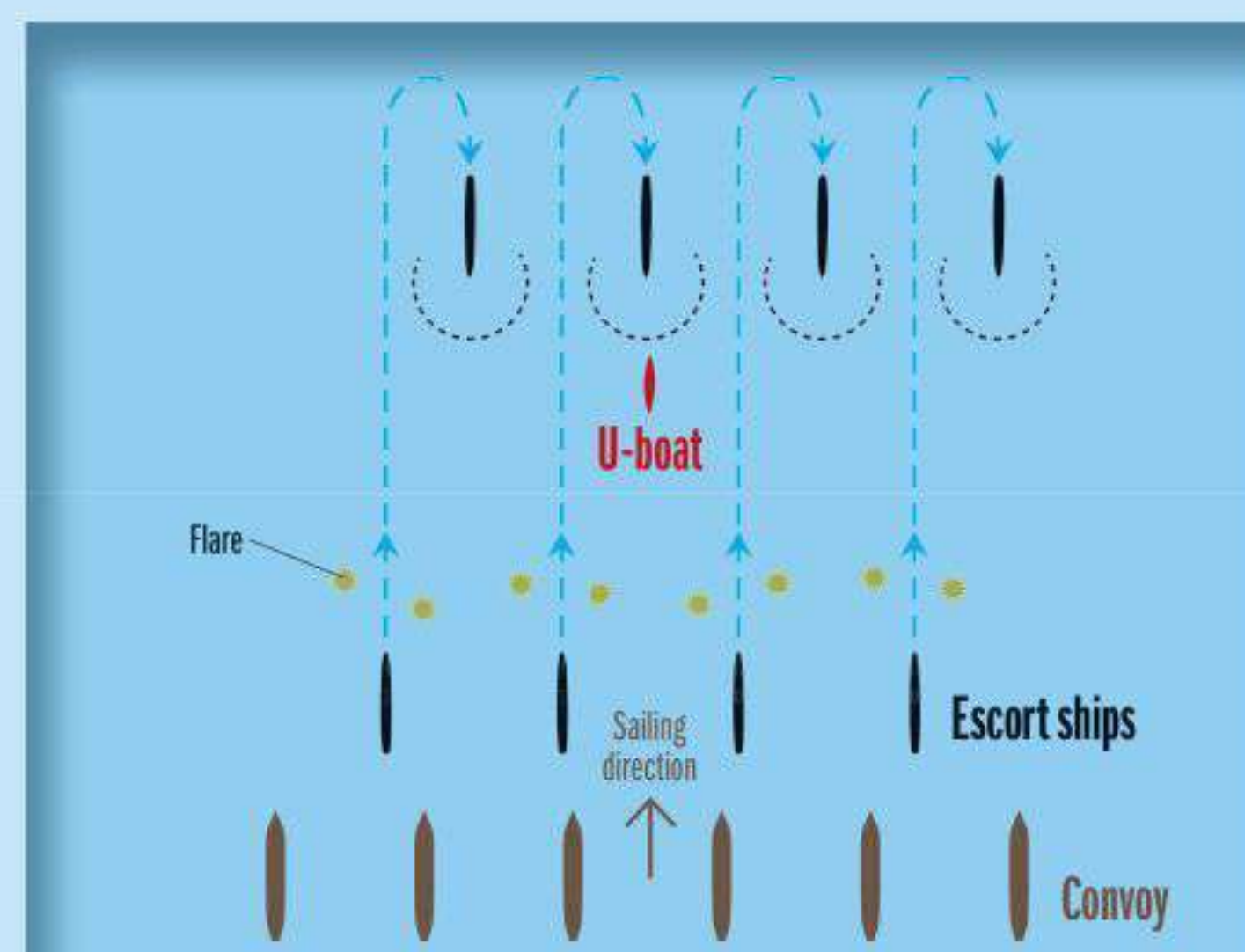
1 U-boat night attack from the flank

Tactic: All warships sail to the sides at top speed, firing flares to illuminate any U-boats on the surface during the attack. If nothing is found, the escort resumes its position after 20 minutes.



2 U-boat attack in the middle of the convoy

Tactic: The escort ships on the flanks quickly move to take up position behind the convoy. Once there, they sail forward, scanning the sea with their sonar to find the U-boat.



3 U-boat spotted in front of convoy at night

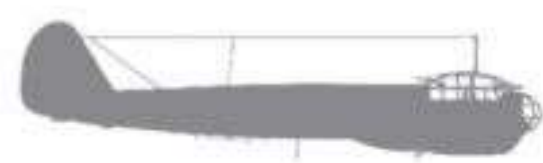
Tactic: The leading warships sail forward at full speed, firing flares to unnerve the U-boat captain and make him dive. After 15 minutes, the ships return and search for the U-boat with sonar.

The cold was so extreme that everything froze – even the anchor chains. The sailors used superheated steam from the engine room to clear the ice.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

“The main thing at this time was to keep the upper deck clear of ice and snow by means of axes, steam hoses etc or the ship could become top heavy”

Seaman William Smith, who sailed with the Arctic convoy PQ 17 in 1942



Enemy Around 260 German bombers and fighters were stationed at air bases in Norway. The aircraft, which included the dreaded Junkers Ju 88 bombers, sank a total of 37 Allied convoy ships.

Convoy struck back

In 1942, the Germans sank over two thirds of the Arctic convoy PQ 17. The following convoy, PQ 18, was more heavily armed.

When German U-boats and bombers sank 24 of the 35 cargo ships sailing with convoy PQ 17 in June 1942, the British were close to abandoning the convoys. But Soviet interests weighed heavily, and in September 1942, convoy PQ 18 sailed from Iceland bound for Arkhangelsk.

The convoy had the best protection to date, with 44 warships, including 25 destroyers and, for the first time, an

aircraft carrier with 13 fighters on board. The German U-boats and aircraft therefore got a nasty surprise when they attacked and were exposed to the enormous firepower of the convoy, which shot down 41 German aircraft and sank three submarines.

When PQ 18 reached Russia, the convoy had 'only' lost 13 ships. It was a great victory for the Allies and proved that the Nazis were not invincible.

From disaster to victory

	 Cargo ships	 Escort ships	 Lost ships	 Enemy losses
PQ 17 departure 27th June 1942	35	19	24	5 planes
PQ 18 departure 2nd Sept 1942	40	44	13	41 planes 3 U-boats



Despite PQ 18's massive escort, the Germans still managed to sink 13 of its 40 cargo ships.

GRANGER/POLFO

to feel the effects of the German redeployment. The convoy got off to an unlucky start when, after just four days at sea, it ran into a violent storm.

"The Barents Sea became a fury of tumultuous water," recalled Ronald Adds, a stoker on the British destroyer *HMS Fury*: "The waves reared up in enormous mountains of water sixty to eighty feet high. Then, there was the cold. Freezing spray formed into ice as soon as it hit superstructures, decks, and guard rails."

The seawater's temperature was minus two degrees Celsius, below the freezing point of fresh water, and

the men had to spend every spare moment knocking ice off the decks and railings to prevent the huge weight of ice from capsizing the ships.

"This icing of the ship had to be experienced to believe it. I went into the CO's cabin and there was a good inch thick of solid ice covering the whole of the bulkhead," recalled Harald Neill, a crewman on the escort *Sumba*.

In the early spring months, the polar ice extended further south than at any other time of the year. Ships therefore had to sail closer to the Norwegian coast, making them more vulnerable to German air attacks. At 10.00 on 28th

March, the convoy was spotted by a German reconnaissance aircraft. Two hours later, a swarm of Ju 88 bombers buzzed overhead.

Two ships were sunk and the survivors were left on lifeboats on the icy sea. The air raids continued relentlessly for the next few days. The gun crews tried to fight back, but according to Neill, who helped, their success was limited:

"At the start of the attack we manned our gun forward of the wheelhouse but as we tried to fire it the barrel blew off – it was full of ice."

The icing of the ships was so severe that at times they looked like icebergs breaking through the sea's surface. Neill noted that the small escort ship *Sulla* was completely encased in ice:

"The *Sulla* was on a parallel course to us not too far away. One minute ... she was there, the next time I looked she had gone. I assumed at the time that she had turned turtle and gone down with the weight of ice."

Sulla took 21 men with it to the depths, but the convoy's ordeal was not over. Now German U-boats attacked, too, sinking three more ships, including William Short's freighter *Induna*. When the convoy finally reached Murmansk, six ships and 148 men had been lost.

The Germans rearm

Eight convoys, consisting of a total of 163 ships, sailed between March and May 1942. Of those, only one escaped without loss. This, coupled with the fate of PQ 13, was a real concern for the Royal Navy. Admiral Sir John Tovey later wrote that the enemy was "determined to do everything in his power to stop this traffic".

Both British and Soviet naval officers warned against sending more convoys. However, neither Churchill nor Stalin would hear of it. So, on 8th April 1942, another convoy, PQ 14, was dispatched. Sailing at that time of year was extremely risky. From the end of April, the Arctic day has 20 hours of daylight, so the ships were visible almost constantly. The convoy, which consisted of 16 ships, was accompanied by a large and powerful escort. In addition to five destroyers and a cruiser, the cargo ships were also followed by a minesweeper and two armed trawlers. There was also a long-range escort, including two battleships, two cruisers and 12 ►

destroyers, which followed the convoy at a distance, only going into action if enemy battleships appeared. But it wasn't enough to protect the convoy. By morning, four cargo ships – 25 percent of the convoy – had been sunk.

PQ 16 didn't fare much better. The convoy of 35 cargo ships and their escort set sail in May 1942. Spotted by German reconnaissance aircraft, it was met by over 100 bombers and planes equipped with torpedoes.

"That was hell. There is no other word I know for it. Everywhere you looked aloft you saw them, crossing and recrossing us, hammering down and back, the bombs brown, sleek in the air, screaming to burst furiously white in the sea," sailor Robert Carse recounted afterwards. He also witnessed the ship at the front of his column being hit by a bomb: "There was a great, a horrible blast. She went in fifteen seconds, a blazing upward sheet of carmine, scarlet and yellow that had the bite of acrid heat we could feel like a blow."

Eight of the convoy's 35 cargo ships were sunk, the majority by bombers.

"The whole thing is [a] most unsound operation with the dice loaded

In 2012, the UK introduced the Arctic Star, a special medal of honour for veterans who served on the convoys north of the Arctic Circle during the war.

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, UNITED KINGDOM

against us in every direction," Admiral Dudley Pound wrote in a later memo.

But Churchill refused to stop the convoys. The threat to the Soviets wasn't over, and the convoys had only delivered around half the planned equipment.

"I share your misgivings," Churchill said, addressing the chiefs of staff, "but I feel it is a matter of duty [to continue]."

PQ 17 was left in the lurch

The fleet commander accepted the decision, but noted in his diary that another convoy was sheer madness.

PQ 17 set out from Iceland on 27th June. Three days later, the Germans spotted it from the air. On 2nd July, they struck and sank three ships. Two days later, they were back, but in the meantime, the German battleship *Tirpitz* had sailed. On learning the news, the panicked fleet commander ordered the convoy to disperse and the escort ships to withdraw.

The cargo ships were thus left to sail unprotected through the bright Arctic summer night. On 5th July, the German Luftwaffe sank seven ships in just 30 minutes. Only on 10th July did the air attacks stop, because the

Germans believed there were no more ships to targets. Out of the original 35 cargo ships, 24 had been lost, taking 153 sailors with them to the depths. In addition, 3,350 vehicles, 430 tanks and 210 bombers sank to the sea bed.

When Stalin heard that the British warships had abandoned the PQ 17 cargo ships, he was furious:

"Has the British Navy no shame?" he asked before demanding that a new convoy sail at once. The British refused. Instead, they offered a compromise: rather than wait for winter darkness, PQ 18 would set out in September.

Allies gained access to Suez

Convoy PQ 18 sailed from Loch Ewe in the north-west of Scotland. With the lesson of PQ 17 in mind, the convoy was accompanied by huge firepower; as many as 44 warships followed the 40 cargo ships this time. But the Germans were getting ready, too. Luftwaffe aircraft, equipped with torpedoes, were on standby, and up to ten German submarines lurked along PQ 18's route.

It was one of the greatest tests of strength during the convoy missions. The German planes and U-boats attacked again and again in an attempt

The crews of the German U-boats hunting the Allied ships also suffered from the extremely cold conditions.

BAYERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK
MÜNCHEN/BILDARCHIV





to stop the convoy, which just as resolutely refused to turn back, despite its many losses. Aran Morris, a sailor on one of the destroyers, saw the freighter *Mary Luckenbach* disappear without trace after a direct hit.

"She was a huge tanker carrying petrol and ammunition to Russia and she was torpedoed. There was a bloody big bang and a big pall of smoke. There wasn't anything left of her. It was something you can't forget."

By the time the convoy reached Arkhangelsk, it had lost 13 cargo ships, but 28 arrived in one piece. At the same time, the escort ships had inflicted heavy losses on the attackers. For the British, it was a great and necessary victory.

The following convoy was cancelled as the Royal Navy needed all its vessels for the invasion of North Africa in November 1942. The subsequent Allied victories, first in North Africa and then Italy, meant that the Mediterranean was open to the navy from autumn 1943. The Soviets could now be supplied via the Suez Canal and ports in the Persian Gulf – a longer but much safer route than the Arctic.

Sailors never forgot the nightmare

Nonetheless, the Arctic convoys continued until May 1945. But while the U-boats remained a threat to the end, the convoys had far more escort vessels, which not only protected the freighters, but also attacked the German submarines. From August 1944 to April 1945, only seven merchant ships and four escort vessels were sunk – three during the last nine weeks of the war.

The Arctic convoys had by then lost 87 cargo ships and 18 escort ships. With them, in the deep, were nearly 3,000 sailors. But the convoys and the brave seamen on them had delivered millions of tonnes of vital supplies.

Those who survived "the worst journey in the world", however, carried the nightmare with them forever. Years after the war, Aran Morris, a sailor on convoy PQ 18, said in an interview that he no longer feared death, adding: "I've already been to hell and back, so I know what it's like."

FURTHER READING



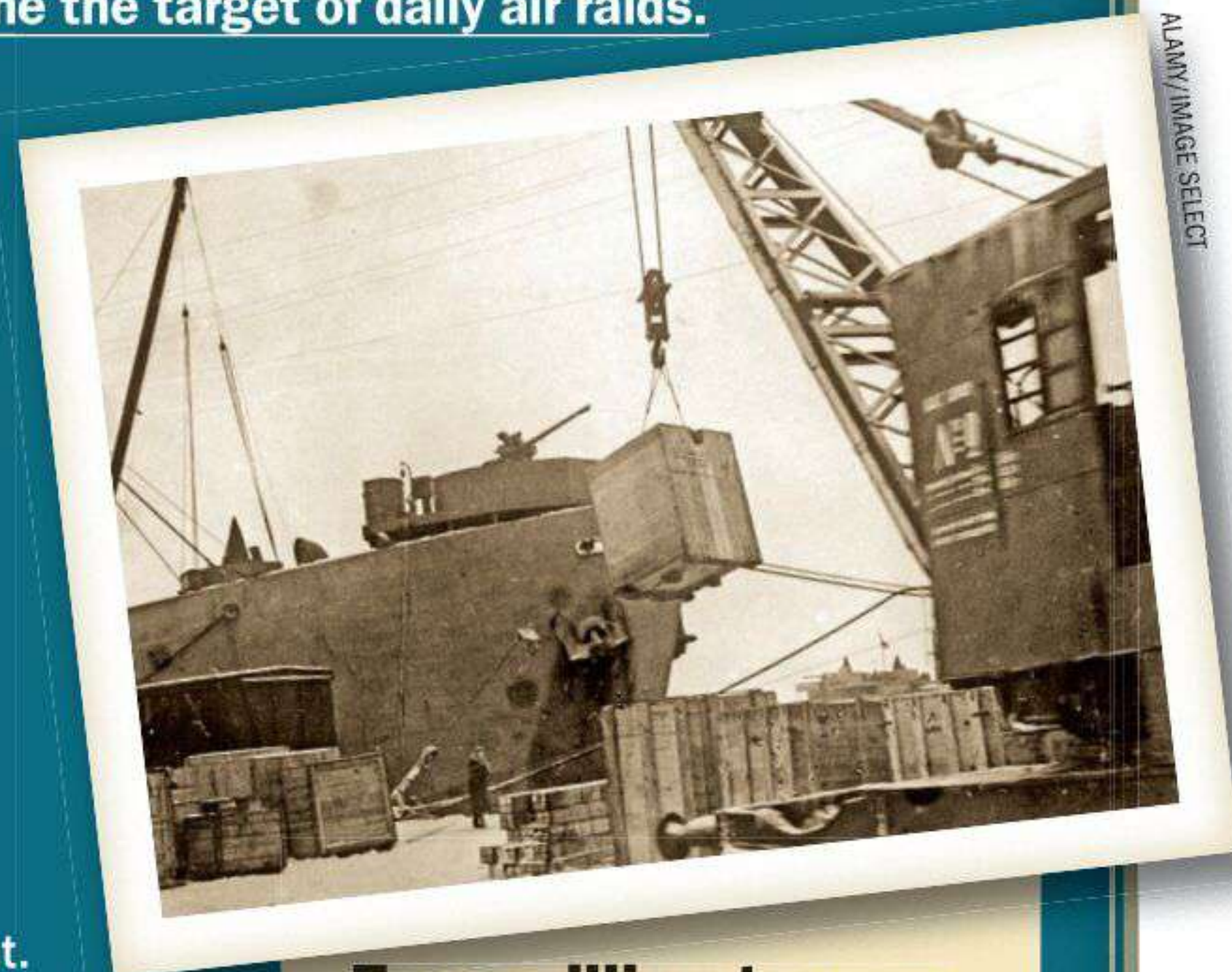
• Michael G Walling: *Forgotten Sacrifice*, Osprey, 2012 • Richard Woodman: *Arctic Convoys, 1941-1945*, Pen and Sword, 2018 • Paul Kemp: *Convoy! Drama in Arctic Waters*, Phoenix, 2000

Murmansk paid dearly for the convoys

The Russian port of Murmansk was crucial for the Arctic convoys and therefore became the target of daily air raids.

Murmansk was of high strategic value as one of the destinations of the Arctic convoys, but it also cost the city dearly. From the start of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazis tried to capture the city. Its ice-free port along with its railway lines that could ship goods across the country were highly attractive to the invading forces. Murmansk was bombed relentlessly by the Luftwaffe, but its people held out.

The city's steadiness and harbour facilities made it ideal for Allied convoys, which did not make the Germans any less keen to get their hands on the city. Air raids from German air bases only 80 kilometres away were the order of the day, and with the majority of the town's houses made of wood, the destruction was extensive. But the inhabitants' stubborn resistance to the German invasion forces and their willingness to aid the Allies helped keep the convoy system going to the end of the war.



ALAMY/IMAGE SELECT

Four million tonnes of cargo arrived

Despite heavy losses, the Arctic convoys delivered 3.9 million tonnes of goods to the Soviets. Historians estimate that amounted to about 12 percent of Soviet military needs.

The convoy ships carried:

Planes:	22,195
Tanks:	13,900
Gins:	13,000
Jeeps:	51,500
Lorries:	373,000
Locomotives:	1,900
Tractors:	8,700
Tyres:	3.8 million
Grenades:	472 million
Explosives:	343,700 tonnes
Fuel:	2.7 million tonnes
Boots:	15 million pairs
Phone cable:	2,055,000 km



Murmansk was subjected to heavy bombardment. In many parts of the city, only chimneys remained.

AKG IMAGES

STALIN'S OIL HAD TO SAVE HITLER

The German Führer was hoping for new victories in 1942 as his tanks roared through the Soviet Union. The target was the rich oil fields of the Caucasus. In a matter of weeks, Hitler planned to have all the fuel he needed to win World War II.

AKG-IMAGES, IMAGESELECT & SHUTTERSTOCK





EASTERN FRONT/1942

World War II is reaching a turning point. Hitler has achieved many victories since 1939, but the enemy's will remains unbroken. By 1942, it looks as though the Germans may not have the strength to finish the war. Hitler lacks soldiers and oil.



BY ESSEN MONSTER-KJÆR

Howling winds tore at the swastika flag the soldiers had just planted in the deep snow. Temperatures on the Caucasian steppes had hit a blistering 52 degrees Celsius in summer 1942, but up there, on top of Mount Elbrus, 5,642 metres above sea level, it was winter, even in August.

The soldiers, however, refused to let the cold dampen their triumph. They were German mountain troops – soldiers who belonged on snow-covered peaks. Two divisions of mountain troops had marched 200 kilometres to reach Europe's highest mountain, and now this small patrol had reached the summit.

Visibility was low. There was fog and swirling snow. But they managed to get some pictures, so the German press could show healthy young heroes on the front page. Then the mountain troops headed back down. Elbrus was conquered, and soon the whole Caucasus

with its rich oil fields would be in German hands, and victory on the Eastern Front would surely be theirs.

The next day, the Germans discovered their mistake. The weather had cleared, and from the valley they could see that the flag was on the wrong peak. The patrol had lost its way in the fog. A new expedition was hastily sent up to correct the blunder before anyone heard of the error.

The news of the expedition to Elbrus had an unexpected effect on Hitler – it made him furious. The dictator demanded that the officers face court martial for wasting time on a propaganda stunt when they should have been fighting for victory. Hitler usually encouraged Nazi propaganda, but too much was at stake in August 1942.

Hitler had sent the German army on a campaign that could give him an

International Wehrmacht:

1,300,000

Around one million German soldiers were deployed to the Soviet Union at the start of Fall Blau. The army was supplemented by 300,000 Romanians, Hungarians, Croats, Italians, Slovaks, Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

unlimited supply of Soviet oil – if it succeeded. If the campaign failed, Germany would lose the war. And Hitler knew it.

Hitler wanted Stalin's oil

The offensive in the Caucasus was a response to the failure of the Germans' attempt to invade the Soviet Union the previous year. The army had advanced at lightning speed, but the distances were great and the roads too poor for Operation Barbarossa to be fully implemented. The offensive had stalled just outside Moscow and Stalin remained unbroken. Throughout winter 1941–42, the freezing German soldiers were subjected to Soviet counter-attacks.

The fiasco in the East meant that the war's character changed. Since 1939, the German army had fought only short campaigns, all of which had ended in crushing victories, after which the troops could rest and rebuild their fighting strength. Now Hitler had to face the fact that defeating the Soviet Union would take time and a lot of effort. And for that, the Germans needed oil; the war effort was guzzling over seven million barrels of oil a month, while the country only had access to five million. Reserve stocks were exhausted by autumn 1941, and all branches of the German military were under strict rationing.

When Hitler studied the maps in the early months of 1942, however, the solution jumped out at him: the Caucasus, home to the Soviet Union's richest oil fields, was within reach, and once in German hands, the armoured divisions would never run out of fuel again. The Maikop oil field produced 19 million barrels a year, the fields at Grozny yielded 32 million, and Baku, further south, supplied Stalin with a staggering 190 million barrels.

Specialists promised Hitler that they could quickly get production going once the fields were captured. In their enthusiasm, they forgot about the Ukrainian oil field, which the Germans had captured in 1941. Fleeing Soviet troops had filled it with concrete and it ►

War made fuel a scarce commodity

The war against the Soviet Union caused a major oil shortage in Germany – Hitler needed to capture new oil fields to win the war.

As far back as the 1920s, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was talking about Lebensraum and Germany's need to seize land to the east. The aim was to make the Germans self-sufficient, so that a foreign blockade could not cause a famine or bring industry to a standstill, as had happened during World War I. But things went the wrong way. In the years that followed, Germany became more dependent on imported fuel, because its own oil reserves only fulfilled around a quarter of its needs.

With the outbreak of war in 1939, the Germans ramped up domestic oil production and Hitler's ally Romania

expanded its vast fields. In addition, Stalin exported large quantities of oil to his then ally. But after the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the arrangement was over. Stocks were quickly depleted and the German army – despite rationing – needed 1.9 million barrels of oil every month for optimal performance.

OIL SUPPLY IN THE YEAR BEFORE THE WAR

Source	Million barrels per year
Oil sources in Germany	4
Synthetic oil (from coal)	9
Imports from Europe (especially Romania)	4
Imports from overseas oil producers	28



Summer 1942: Germany was never bigger. Mountain troops even planted a swastika on the summit of Mount Elbrus – 2,400 kilometres from the German capital, Berlin.

BRIDGEMAN



GETTY IMAGES



Mountain troops were used to using mules to get through rough terrain.

New German arms in 1942

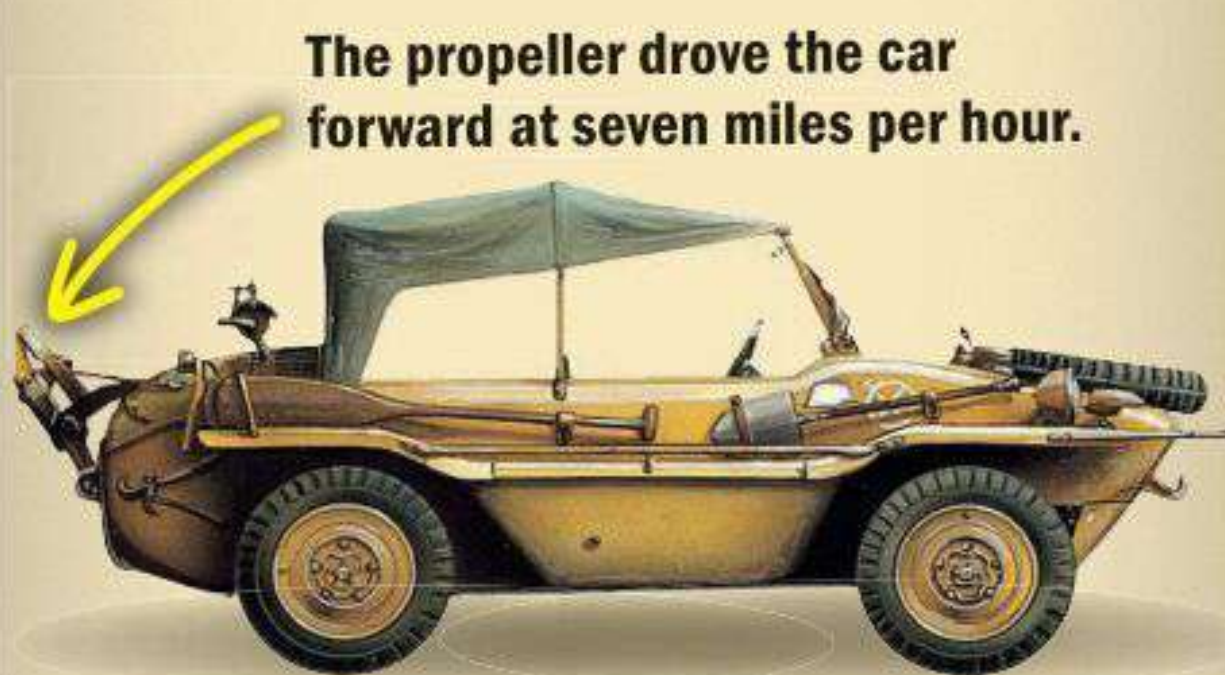


At 1,200 rounds per minute, the MG 42's rate of fire surpassed all other weapons of the war.

Hitler's buzz saw

Maschinengewehr 42

German infantry had more firepower than any of their opponents thanks to the excellent MG 42 machine gun. Allied troops called the weapon "Hitler's buzz saw" because of its distinctive sound when firing. The barrel quickly overheated and could therefore be changed in seconds.



The propeller drove the car forward at seven miles per hour.

Bathtub on wheels

Volkswagen Type 166

The Soviet Union's poor roads and many rivers were major obstacles to the German advance. So, VW developed an amphibious car that could negotiate even the most difficult terrain. On water, the front wheels acted as rudders.

The gun was Soviet, while the hull was from a Panzer II.



A German bastard

Marder II (Sonder Kfz 132)

German tanks were hopelessly outgunned when they met the Soviet T-34 in 1941. It took time to produce improved tanks. In the meantime the troops got a military cut-and-shut: obsolete German tanks that were fitted with captured Russian guns.

still wasn't producing a year later. Other experts were less enraptured by the Führer's Caucasian plan: the generals tasked with making it a reality.

Führer ignored all advice

In early spring 1942, Germany's top officers looked to the future with deep pessimism. They had opposed the attack on the Soviet Union from the start because such an enormous task required more forces than even the Wehrmacht, Germany's armed forces, could muster. Since then, heavy losses and the degradation of aircraft and tanks had only further weakened the forces now deep inside the Soviet Union.

Most believed that the Wehrmacht should remain on the defensive on the Eastern Front – some even talked of withdrawal to the frontier. Hitler responded by handing out P45s to the worst naysayers. In his view, the armed forces' senior ranks were populated by crybabies who saw limitations rather than opportunities. That's why Hitler appointed himself commander-in-chief of the army and took control of the day-to-day management of the war.

By spring, only one officer was still close enough to Germany's dictator to influence strategy. His name was Franz Halder, and as chief of staff of the Army High Command (OKH), it was his duty to carry out Hitler's orders.

"There was a 'battle of opinion'," Halder's closest aide, General Günther Blumentritt, told British historian BH Liddell Hart after the war. Halder warned against going on the offensive in 1942 after he received intelligence reports that the Soviets were producing 600–700 new tanks every month.

"When Halder told him of this, Hitler slammed the table and said it was impossible," Blumentritt recalled.

"He would not believe what he did not want to believe." Hitler had decided that the Red Army was greatly weakened after its losses in 1941. This interpretation explains Führer Directive No 41, which Hitler issued in April:

"As soon as the weather and the state of the terrain allows, we must seize the initiative again, and through the superiority of German leadership and the German soldier force our will upon the enemy," Hitler dictated.

All forces were to be used to capture the rich oil deposits of the Caucasus.

"If I do not get the oil of Maikop and Grozny then I must end this war," Hitler

International Wehrmacht:

GEORGIA

According to Nazi race theorist Alfred Rosenberg, the Georgians were particularly valuable soldiers because they were Aryans like the Germans. Around 14,000 fought in the Caucasus.

declared. General Halder had been put on notice – now, like a good soldier, he had to obey and devise a plan for an operation he himself did not believe in. The result was a strategic masterpiece.

Stalin made Germany's task easier

Spring was drawing to a close and the sun had long since dried the muddy steppes of Russia. Yet the Germans did nothing. On the other side of the front, Joseph Stalin had come to the conclusion that the Germans had been weakened by heavy losses, and ordered an attack.

750,000 Red Army troops advanced on the industrial city of Kharkiv in Ukraine (200 kilometres south of Kursk). German infantry and guns met the attack, and only when the Soviet troops were locked in combat did General Halder unleash his armoured divisions. German tanks poured in on both sides of Stalin's armies, which were forced into a headlong retreat. Close to half were caught when the Germans closed their trap, and the Red Army lost nearly 300,000 men in three weeks of fighting. German losses were limited to 20,000.

The Battle of Kharkiv showed that the Germans were still the masters at manoeuvring. They had fewer tanks than the Soviets, and those they did have were technologically inferior, but that didn't matter because the Germans had well-trained officers, effective Luftwaffe support and plenty of radios for coordination between units.

The swift victory stiffened German confidence after a winter of adversity, and Stalin's reckless attack had made future operations easier: "It used up much of the strength that might otherwise have been available to meet our offensive," Blumentritt estimated.

The Germans spent most of June preparing, and on the 28th the great offensive finally began. The code name for the operation was *Fall Blau*, which translates as Plan Blue. The German troops quickly broke through the Soviet units, which were still reeling from the huge losses at Kharkiv. The advance proceeded at a breakneck pace, and ►

The tanks headed south

Prior to the Fall Blau offensive, Hitler split his army in two. In all, 1.5 million soldiers and 1,500 tanks went south to capture the Soviet Union's richest sources of oil. The goal was within reach, but suddenly Hitler had other plans.

Eastern Front 1942

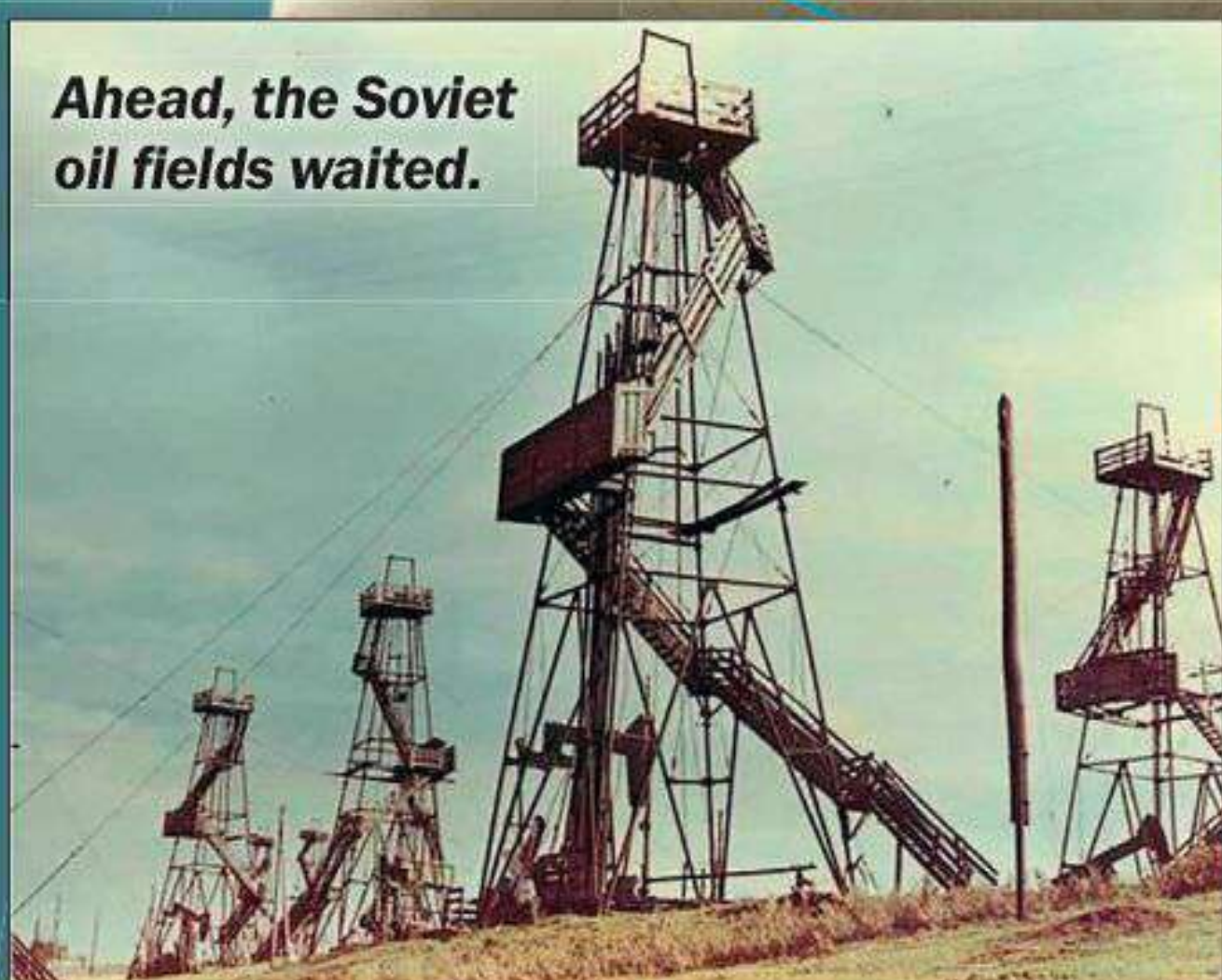


Cover: Meanwhile, Soviet supply lines must be cut by **Army Group B**.

Caucasus offensive: Hitler orders **Army Group A** to rush south and capture the oil towns of Maikop and Grozny.

- Front line on 28th June
- Front line in summer 1942
- Front line on 7th July
- Front line on 22nd July
- Front line on 1st August
- Front line on 18th November

Ahead, the Soviet oil fields waited.



Hunt for Stalin's oil

1 Hitler's offensive begins

28th June 1942: German troops attack weakened Soviet units near the city of Kharkiv. The advance is rapid – Fall Blau is under way.

2 General Kleist crosses the Don

5th July: The Germans reach the Don River, which forms the border with the Caucasus.

3 Stalin loses contact

29th July: A German column enters the town of Proletarskaya. This cuts the Stalingrad-Tikhoretsk railway line and prevents the Red Army from sending reinforcements overland to the Caucasus.

4 Infantry is sent to the coast

As Kleist's tanks head for the oil, the 17th Army is ordered to capture the Black Sea coast. The target is of little importance and ties up troops.

5 The oil city of Maikop falls

9th August: After just six weeks, the Germans take the oil fields at Maikop, but the Soviets manage to sabotage oil production and reserves.

6 Mountain troops scale Mt Elbrus

Kleist's mountain troops (10,000 men) are directed to the Caucasus Mountains. In September they climb Mount Elbrus, Europe's highest peak.

7 German army grinds to a halt

End of August: German armoured divisions reach the River Terek. On 2nd September, the soldiers cross, but Kleist has surrendered so many troops that he cannot continue towards Grozny.

Troops sent to Stalingrad

During the campaign, Hitler ordered thousands of soldiers to be redeployed to the battle at Stalingrad.

CRIMEA

Yalta

0 100 200

Oil fields destroyed

Maikop

Mt Elbrus

Oil fields not captured
Grozny

ADOLF HITLER

FRANZ HALDER

The German leader and his OKH chief of staff, General Halder, were at loggerheads over the campaign.

GETTY IMAGES

Hitler moved to Ukraine

In summer 1942, Hitler left the Wolf's Lair in East Prussia. His new HQ in Ukraine was called Werwolf. He believed the new location would give him more insight into the war in the East.

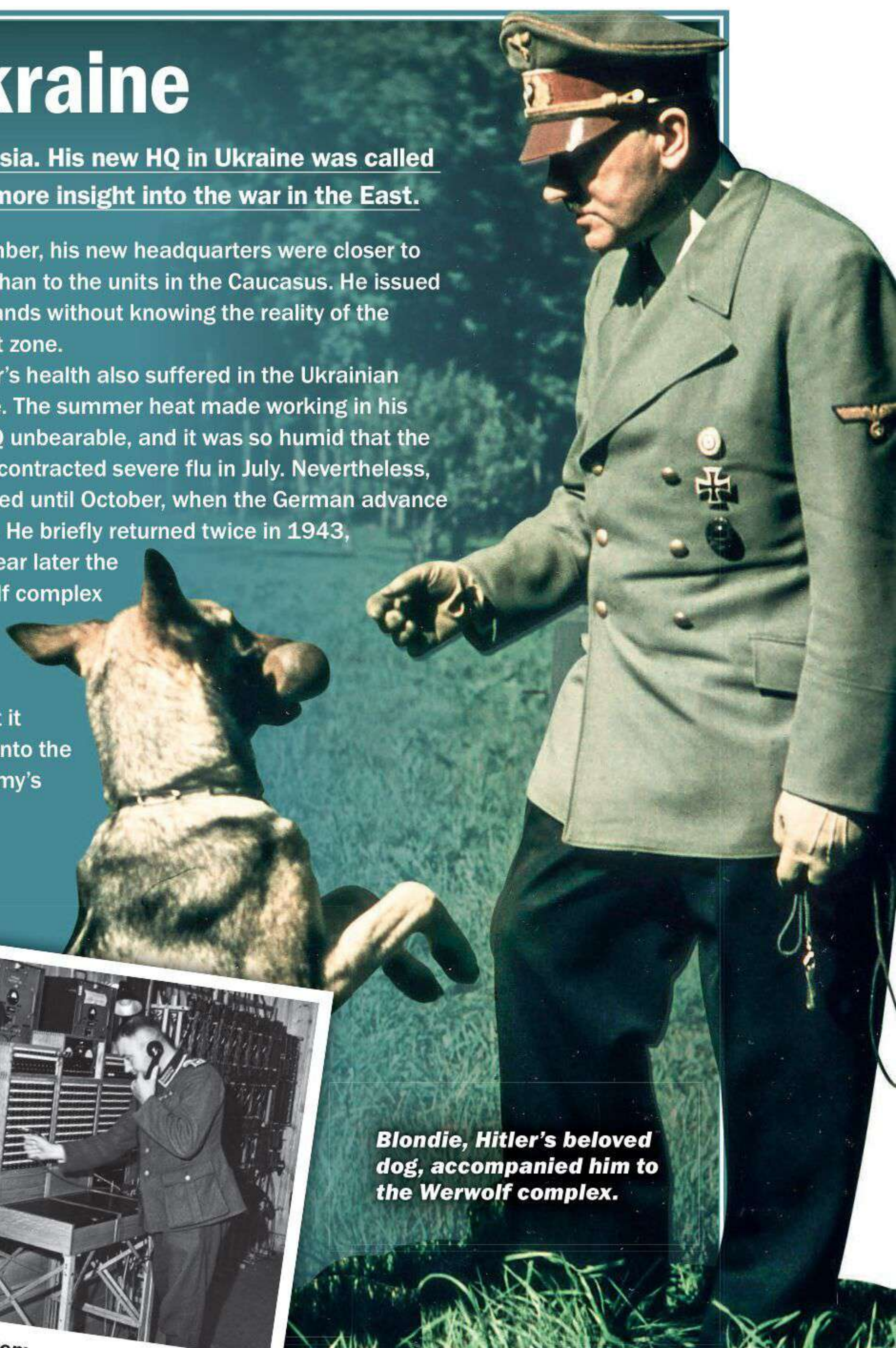
Soviet prisoners of war built a new headquarters for Hitler in the spring of 1942. In June, as soon as the dictator moved in, he demanded that all the construction workers be executed – they knew too much.

The building complex, named Werwolf, was hidden in a forest and housed a small army of staff officers and servants. Behind the barbed-wire fences lay a military command centre and bunker facilities, along with log cabins, a dining hall, sauna and cinema for the relaxation of the German general staff.

The idea of Werwolf was that its proximity to the front would enable Hitler to better command the Fall Blau offensive. In reality, he may as well have stayed in the Wolf's Lair in East Prussia, because even at the start of the fighting, he was over 700 kilometres from the front line, and the distance only increased as the German forces advanced. By

September, his new headquarters were closer to Berlin than to the units in the Caucasus. He issued commands without knowing the reality of the combat zone.

Hitler's health also suffered in the Ukrainian climate. The summer heat made working in his new HQ unbearable, and it was so humid that the Führer contracted severe flu in July. Nevertheless, he stayed until October, when the German advance stalled. He briefly returned twice in 1943, but a year later the Werwolf complex was blown up to prevent it falling into the Red Army's hands.



Blondie, Hitler's beloved dog, accompanied him to the Werwolf complex.



Hitler made a point of eating the same food as his troops, but his was prepared by chefs.



The telephone system enabled orders to reach the farthest sections of the front.

even the most sceptical German generals found it hard to remain pessimistic.

Within three weeks, the Germans reached the mighty River Don, and thus the next and decisive phase of Fall Blau could begin. Tanks were standing at the gateway to the Caucasus, ahead of which lay the Soviet oil wells that would make Germany invincible.

Armoured divisions got under way

Halder's grand operational plan was based on Ewald von Kleist reaching the Soviet oil. By 1942, Kleist was one of Germany's most experienced panzer generals, having led large tank forces to victory in France and the Soviet Union. He had also delivered the decisive

blow at Kharkiv. Everyone had high expectations of him.

When Kleist set out with 1st Panzer Army, he knew he had a long way to go. The Maikop fields were 330 kilometres away, and he had 750 kilometres to Grozny and the Caucasian mountains. That was as far as Hitler imagined Kleist could go before winter.

The offensive got off to a good start when German engineer troops managed to build two bridges across the 150-metre-wide Don. The bewildered Soviet forces didn't rally for a counter-attack until several days later, by which

time Kleist's tanks had long since begun to rumble over the river. Then the German tanks cut south, capturing key transport intersections before the Soviets could mount a proper defence.

Dismayed, Stalin issued Order No 227, which warned of the consequences of a continued German advance: "If we do not stop retreating we will be without bread, without fuel, without metal, without raw material, without factories and plants, without railways."

The soldiers had to fight, and Stalin promised bloody reprisals against cowards and alarmists. "Not one step back!" was the new slogan.

However, Moscow's words bore little relation to the reality on the front in the

International Wehrmacht:

ARMENIA

The Nazis believed that Armenians also belonged to the Aryan race. Yet the Armenians, being traders, were suspected of being like the Jews. 33,000 fought on the German side.

Caucasus. Kleist crushed all Soviet forces, who chose to stand rather than flee. And the battle became even more one-sided after 29th July, when German vanguards overran the only railway line between the Caucasus and the rest of the Soviet Union.

Kleist's forces were now in the unusual position of having more and better tanks than the enemy. While a small number of Soviet T-34s reached the front via ferries across the Caspian Sea, the Germans more often met British and US tanks sent by the Allies as military aid through Persia to the Red Army. The tanks were typically too slow for the blitzkrieg on the Eastern Front, and the crews were constantly short of ammunition and spare parts.

Victory celebrated at Werwolf HQ

By the summer of 1942, victory reports were pouring in and Hitler was able to celebrate at his newly built Werwolf headquarters in Ukraine. The Red Army had been exposed as a powerless giant, just as he had predicted. And the generals, led by Halder, had shown themselves to be a bunch of weaklings.

Hitler envied Stalin, he told a dinner party attended by Halder – the Soviet leader could crack down harder on recalcitrant generals than was possible in Germany. The great purges of the 1930s had turned the Red Army into a tool driven by ideology and completely tied to the will of its leader. Hitler regretted that the same kind of fanaticism did not exist in the German officer corps:

"They have scruples, make objections, and are not sufficiently with me," Hitler complained. His distrust of the generals led him to interfere in the smallest details at the front, hundreds of miles away. And illness did not stem the flow of orders, either. Hitler was suffering from severe flu in late July 1942 when he made a strategic decision that would later have disastrous consequences.

Halder found his job unbearable and tried several times to quit. But Hitler

refused to let him resign, because despite their many clashes, Germany's dictator knew he needed men like Halder to make the country's mighty military work. And the campaign promised to deliver the oil Hitler had declared crucial to the war's outcome. In early August, Kleist's tanks approached Maikop's oil fields.

Special troops went after the oil

The Germans did not expect the Red Army to leave the oil extraction facilities intact if they were driven from Maikop. Kleist therefore had a special unit ready to thwart any sabotage.

Baulehr-kompagnie 800 (Special Operations Unit 800), known colloquially as the Brandenburgers, was set up by *Abwehr*, the German intelligence service. Its soldiers were specialists in commando operations behind enemy lines: spying, securing key targets, spreading misinformation and training rebel forces.

The Brandenburgers were often required to wear enemy uniforms and master foreign languages. In the unit Kleist commanded, most were from the Baltic states and could speak Russian.

On 1st August, 62 Brandenburgers set off for Maikop. They easily penetrated Soviet territory – Kleist's war of manoeuvre had broken up the front lines – then drove 100 km behind enemy lines. No one questioned the Germans who were disguised as members of the dreaded Soviet security service, the NKVD.

In Maikop, the Brandenburgers took control of two communications centres and, using radios and telephones, spread alarming reports that the German army was already surrounding the town. The hoax caused several Soviet units to ▶

"In this battle mercy or considerations of international law is false. They are a danger to our own safety and to the rapid pacification of the conquered territories."

Commissar Order, issued by Adolf Hitler on 6th June 1941

POWs worked or died

Before the 1941 campaign in the Soviet Union, Hitler told his generals that the rules of war would be suspended during the fighting on the Eastern Front. Hitler planned not just to subjugate the nations there, but to destroy all traces of Communist ideology along with a population he viewed as *utermensch* (subhumans).

The Nazis won crushing victories, and some 3.3 million Soviet soldiers surrendered. Of these, 2.8 million perished in just six months, after being held in fields without shelter or sanitation. Food was almost nonexistent. Not even the Nazi concentration camps killed people as quickly as the POW camps on the Eastern Front.

Growing difficulties in the East, however, forced Hitler to change his position in 1942. Contrary to expectations, the Soviets had not collapsed and the war industry in Germany was in dire need of workers. Henceforth, Soviet prisoners were transferred to German factories and farms. Hard labour and poor nutrition still killed many POWs, but the death rate was much lower than in the merciless months of 1941.



In 1941, Soviet POWs were allowed to starve to death. The following year, they were to forced to work in agriculture and factories.

International Wehrmacht:

AZERBAIJAN

Hitler considered Azerbaijanis and other Muslim peoples in Central Asia to be true warriors. Their countries had been subsumed into the Soviet Union, leading 70,000 volunteers to join the German side.

pack up and hurry away while the roads were still open.

The next part of the Brandenburgers' mission proved far more difficult. Maikop's oil wells were scattered over a large area, and it was impossible for the 62 men to reach more than the nearest fields. And here, even an NKVD uniform wasn't enough to stop the Soviets destroying equipment they feared might otherwise fall into German hands. Red Army units blew up all the oil pumps, filled the bore holes with iron and concrete, and set fire to several storage tank facilities.

When Kleist's troops reached Maikop on 9th August, the Brandenburgers had only managed to save 29 tanks of crude oil. It would take months to get production going again and establish transport routes to the refineries in Germany. The battle for the Caucasus was far from over, but after the Germans' first blazing successes, storm clouds were gathering on the horizon.

Offensive ran out of fuel

Hitler had designated the oil wells as the strategic target in 1942, but in practice he chose to pursue several objectives from the beginning. While Kleist raced south through the Caucasus, the Nazi leader had sent other German forces east. This was intended to prevent the Red Army going to the aid of the threatened oil fields or attacking elsewhere. But having two major offensives occurring at the same time required more resources than Germany had available. By mid-August, Kleist had to report that he had no enemies in front of him and no supplies behind.

The German panzers stopped with empty fuel tanks just 200 kilometres from the oil city of Grozny. They had exhausted their meagre reserves and, after the rapid advance, the armoured column was now far from the German army's supply depots. It took time to bring supplies up the Caucasus's miserable roads. And along the way, ►

German soldiers covered kilometre after kilometre as they raced after the fleeing Red Army.

IMAGESELECT







GETTY IMAGES

In just six weeks, the Germans reached Maikop's oil fields – only to hear the town's oil plant being blown up and see vital tanks of fuel burn.

the trucks themselves used up the fuel intended for Kleist's units.

"A certain amount of oil was delivered by air, but the total which came through was insufficient to maintain the momentum of the advance, which came to a halt just when our chances looked best," Kleist explained after the war.

Air transport itself was a huge waste of resources. A less costly but extremely

slow method was to transport supplies on camels. Precious time was lost in this way, and the Red Army in the Caucasus was given breathing room in which to reorganise its units and take on fresh troops, who were shipped to the front across the Caspian Sea.

Kleist felt that the Soviet defences were growing stronger as he edged towards the Terek River in September

1942. The terrain was also against him – the closer he got to the Caucasus mountains, the more rugged and forested the landscape became. The river itself also proved a difficult obstacle. His engineers and their bridge-building equipment had been left far behind because all fuel had been given to the armoured units.

Stalingrad overshadowed the goal

The Terek River came to mark the limit of the German advance in 1942. And according to Kleist, it was the Germans' own fault. He believed a lack of fuel "was not the ultimate cause of the failure. We could still have reached our goal if my forces had not been drawn away bit by bit to help the attack at Stalingrad".

The German advance on the Soviet city was originally intended to support the offensive in the Caucasus. Stalingrad itself was not considered to be of great strategic importance: "At the start, Stalingrad was no more than a name on the map to us," Kleist recalled.

According to several generals, the Germans could easily have taken the city in late July 1942 if the necessary number of troops and aircraft had been allocated to the operation. But at that time, Hitler was still giving priority to the Caucasus. The trapped Soviet army therefore had time to prepare its defences, and the Germans met stiff resistance in late summer when they finally reached the city's suburbs.

For Hitler the matter was clear: Germany had all but won the war for the Caucasus, so he could move troops to Stalingrad, where, against all military logic, the Germans would fight their way into the city centre. Manoeuvring in open terrain was the German army's speciality; in the ruins of Stalingrad, it had no particular advantage. The advance moved at a snail's pace, provoking Hitler to throw more and more forces into the battle, which had no bearing at all on the main mission: the capture of the Caucasus.

"Besides part of my motorised troops, I had to give up the whole of my flak corps and all my air force except the reconnaissance squadrons," Kleist later recalled.

Other side projects drained even more energy. Hitler demanded that the entire Soviet Black Sea coast be captured so that the Axis powers could safely transport supplies and crude oil by sea. The operation extended the German front line even further, and Kleist lost

International Wehrmacht

ROMANIA

In June 1940, threats of a Soviet invasion led Romania – already one of the Nazis' main oil suppliers – to ally with Germany. During the war, as many as 382,000 Romanians fought on the German side.

even more units that should have been used for his advance on Grozny.

Hitler bet high and lost

Drunk on his successes, Hitler had identified too many targets, and the German forces were hopelessly scattered in the Caucasus and around Stalingrad. The OKH chief of staff could see disaster

approaching, but Germany's leader would not listen.

"Finally, General Haider made it clear that he refused to take the responsibility of continuing the advance with winter approaching," General Blumentritt recalled. "He was dismissed, at the end of September."

Fighting continued unabated in Stalingrad, while forces in the Caucasus stood still. And in November, what Halder had feared happened. For some time, Stalin had been gathering reserves for a counteroffensive, and in November, masses of tanks cut effortlessly through the thinly occupied German front line. Stalingrad was surrounded and an entire German army of over 300,000 soldiers was doomed. Halder had been right

when he predicted back in the spring that the German army was too weak to carry out major offensives on the Eastern Front. But Hitler's prophecy also proved true: without fresh sources of oil to keep German planes and tanks going, the war would inevitably end in defeat. Yet, despite knowing that he would eventually be forced to concede, he forced the Germans to fight on. ■

Postscript: After the war, General Kleist was convicted of war crimes. He died in Soviet captivity in 1954. Chief of Staff Halder spent two years in captivity, then retired. During the Cold War, he served as a consultant to West Germany's newly formed Federal Army.

FURTHER READING



• BH Liddell Hart: **German Generals Talk**, William Morrow, 1980 • Robert Forczyk: **The Caucasus 1942–43: Kleist's race for oil**, Osprey, 2015

Stalingrad broke the German army

The victories of 1942 convinced Hitler that he was close to winning World War II. Buoyed by this notion, he gathered 850,000 troops to take Stalingrad.

Before the great offensive on the Soviet Union in 1942, Stalingrad had been "no more than a name on the map", as one German general put it, but as the summer wore on, Hitler became increasingly intent on crushing the city that bore the name of his worst enemy.

Unfortunately, Stalin was at least as intent on holding the city – regardless of the cost in human lives. As the Germans fought their way through the streets of Stalingrad during the autumn, Stalin was able to build up a large fighting force in the hinterland. He decided to take advantage of all the German reserves

fighting in the ruined city, while the flank was defended by weaker units from Hitler's allies – Italy, Hungary and Romania. The Soviets' Operation Uranus began as soon as frost made the marshy countryside passable for tanks.

On 19th November, three Soviet armies attacked a single Romanian army whose positions lay 130 km north of Stalingrad. The Romanians had no chance to prevent the hundreds of enemy tanks from breaking through the lines.

The next day, Soviet forces attacked south of the city. Here, too, the front was held by Romanians who were equally

unable to resist the pressure. Inside Stalingrad, Germany's 6th Army asked permission to withdraw while there was still a way out. Hitler refused, and a few hours later, the Red Army closed the ring around Stalingrad. Over the next months, the trapped Germans were broken by hunger, cold and constant attacks.

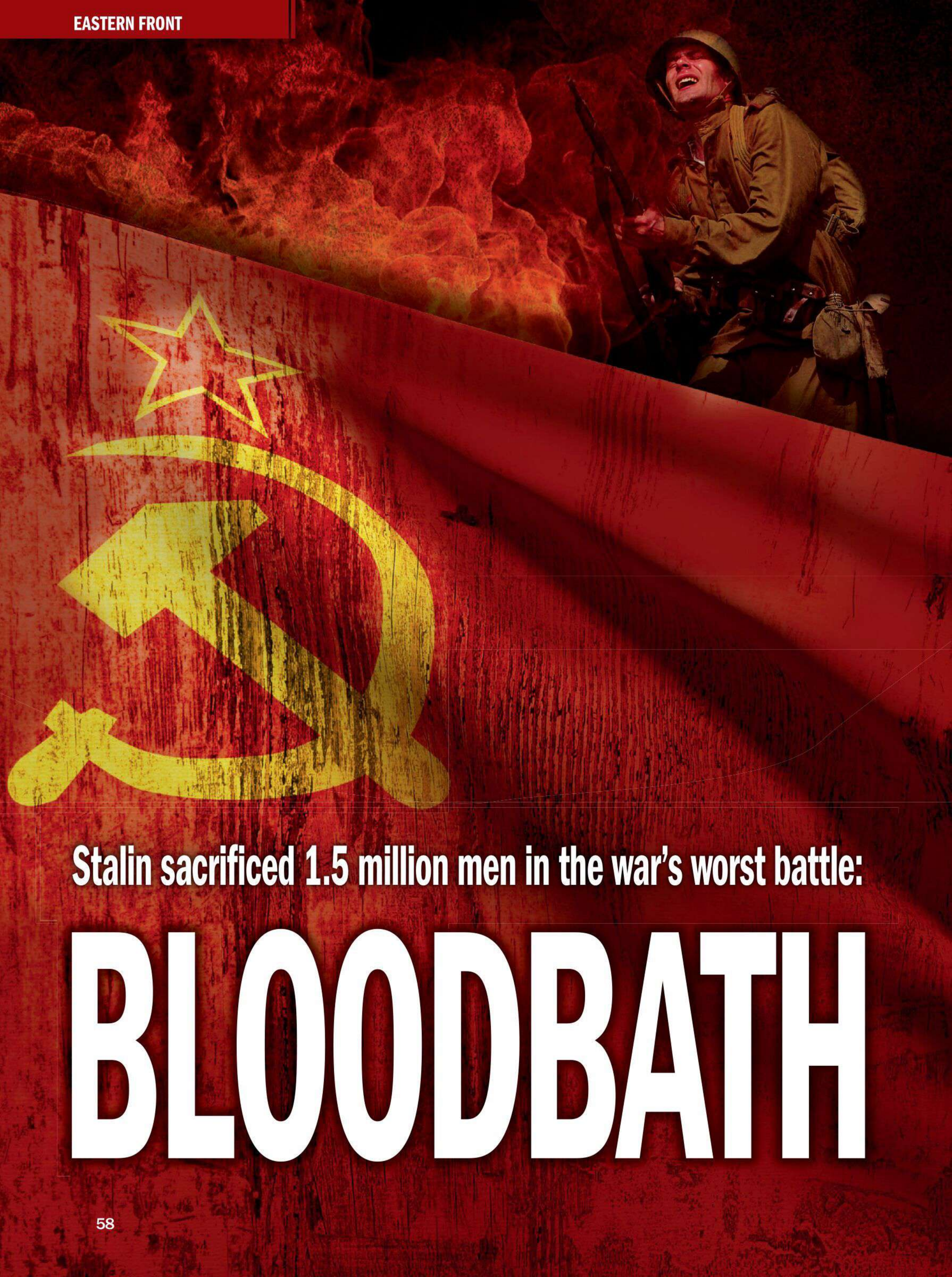
On 2nd February 1943, the last Germans surrendered. The battle had cost 250,000 lives. The defeat also meant that German forces further south had to withdraw. All captured objectives were lost.



The Luftwaffe tried to resupply the encircled troops in Stalingrad, but the task was too great.

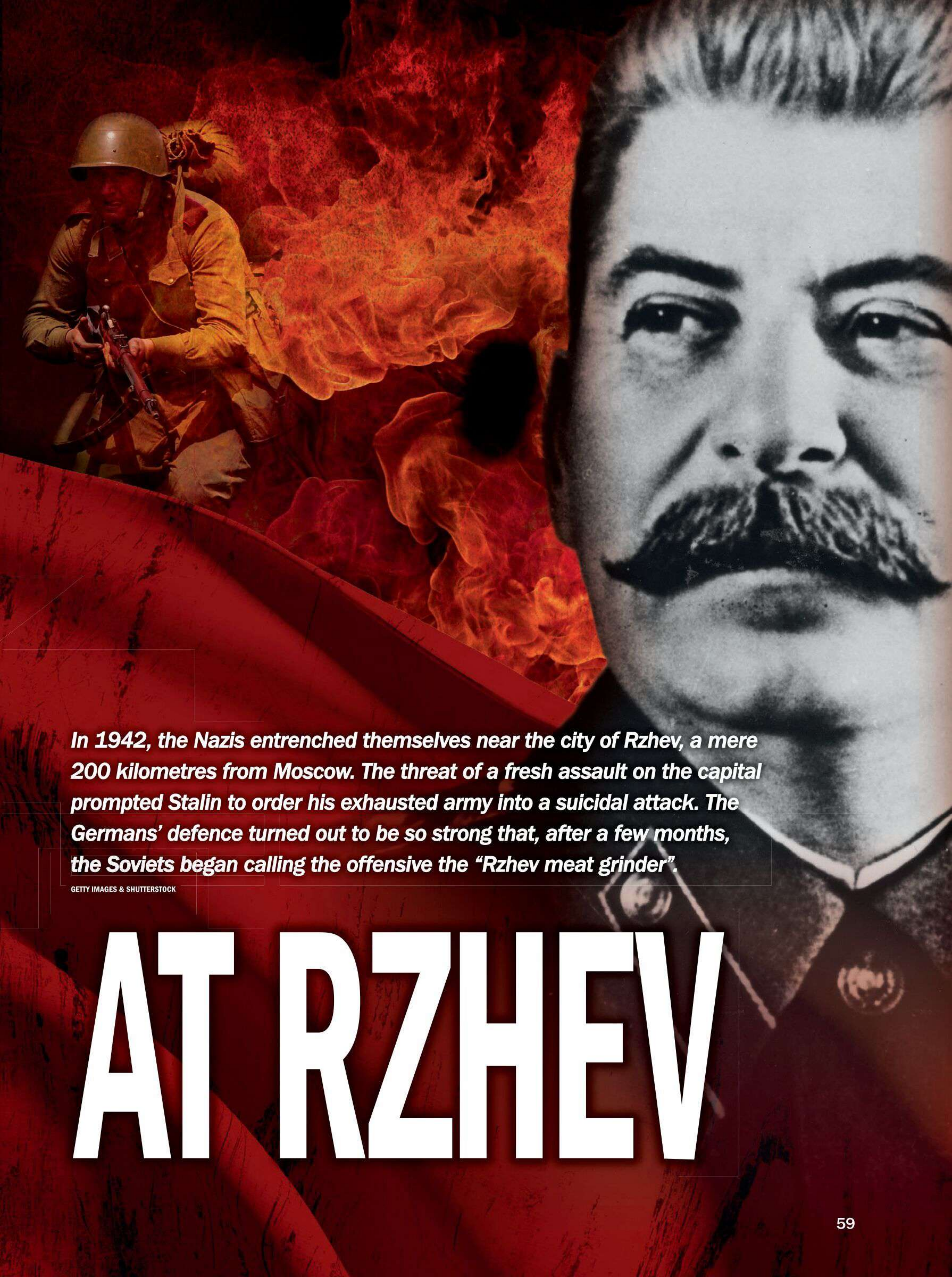


Starvation, howling blizzards and desperate shortages of ammunition broke the Germans' morale.



Stalin sacrificed 1.5 million men in the war's worst battle:

BLOODBATH



In 1942, the Nazis entrenched themselves near the city of Rzhev, a mere 200 kilometres from Moscow. The threat of a fresh assault on the capital prompted Stalin to order his exhausted army into a suicidal attack. The Germans' defence turned out to be so strong that, after a few months, the Soviets began calling the offensive the "Rzhev meat grinder".

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AT RZHEV

BY THERESE BOISEN HAAS

“After me! Forward! Cha-a-a-ge!” Boris Gorbachevsky suddenly felt completely alone in the world. Somewhere, a few hundred metres ahead, “Hitler’s beasts” lay in their trenches, where they’d been holed up for months, with the Red Army unable to push them back. The young infantryman knew what he had to do, but was rooted to the spot. A wave of nausea flooded over him as he gripped his rifle tightly.

That August morning in 1942, Gorbachevsky was in a village south-west of Rzhev, near Moscow, his division decimated. Soviet tanks continued to roll out from the edge of the forest behind him, and the sound of the first shell ripped through the morning silence. The offensive – or “meat grinder”, as the Red Army soldiers called it – was under way. Again.

“Forward! Forward!” roared a commander. Feeling a trickle of sweat under his helmet, Gorbachevsky forced himself to stand up. Row after row of Red Army soldiers rushed forward, wildly roaring the Soviet battle cry: “Ura-a! Ura-a!” They were halfway out into the open when the Germans opened fire: geysers of earth shot up, and the dead and the living were thrown into the air. The wounded screamed for help. In the middle of it all, Gorbachevsky heard a terrifying howling noise. A bomber, with its siren wailing, suddenly dived and dropped its load. Deafening explosions forced the air from Gorbachevsky’s lungs. Confused, he searched the skies in vain

for the Soviet planes that should have been counter-attacking.

One of the surviving officers urged the troops forward again with a roar, and once more Gorbachevsky headed straight towards the German onslaught. Some of his comrades vomited while running. Others cried. There were few men left in Gorbachevsky’s group when he fell to the ground himself. He’d been hit by shrapnel.

Despite the huge Soviet losses, it didn’t surprise Gorbachevsky to see a new wave of soldiers surging forward behind him. The human sacrifice continued all day, and the deaths among the exhausted, starving Red Army soldiers broke all records. But Gorbachevsky understood Stalin’s order: the German front line near Moscow had to be destroyed, whatever it took – even if it cost Gorbachevsky his life.

Stalin’s lightning offensive

Several months before Gorbachevsky was hit by shrapnel, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had called together the Red Army’s high command, the Stavka. He was still feeling buoyant after the victory in Moscow in 1941, but one thing tormented him: only 200 kilometres from the capital, the Germans had entrenched themselves in a pocket of approximately 200 square kilometres around the city of Rzhev. The area, according to Stalin, was a pistol pointed at the heart of the Soviet Union.

“The Germans are in disarray as a result of their defeat,” he told his top generals and advisers.

According to the dictator, winter was the best time to launch an offensive,

The Soviets’ bloody mistakes
Stalin was too ambitious. The Red Army in 1942 was overstretched and incapable of driving the Germans away from Rzhev.

but General Zhukov, the hero of the victory at Moscow, cautiously objected, saying their lack of ammunition, fuel and equipment was a serious problem. The Red Army had been weakened, and the victory had cost a lot of lives. But Stalin wouldn’t listen: “Our task is ... to give the Germans no time to draw breath,” the dictator admonished.

Stalin wanted a lightning offensive: the German pocket was to be attacked simultaneously from two sides, the towns in the area were to be recaptured on the way, and the Wehrmacht’s reserves were to be depleted. The German army had a total of 625,000 men, and the Soviets would pitch 688,000 against them.

On 10th January 1942, 45-year-old General Efremov launched an attack on Rzhev from the south-east. At the same time, the 29th Army struck from the north; the Germans’ fist-shaped salient needed to be cut off at the wrist.

Efremov managed to break through the German front line and drive a 110-kilometre wedge towards the town of Vyazma, south-west of Rzhev. His troops were approaching Vyazma when the worst possible news reached the general’s ears.

The Germans had attacked his rear troops and cut him off from the rest of the Red Army. Efremov’s men were surrounded behind enemy lines and left

For 14 months, Soviet forces fought in vain against superior German forces.

GETTY IMAGES



to fend for themselves in the bitter Soviet winter. Many years later, Soviet soldier Yevgeny Nizovtsev described how the winter had been mercilessly harsh, with snow so deep that it was almost impossible to walk, and perpetual snowstorms. All the while, the Red Army's troops had to continue

fighting, even though they were surrounded and constantly fired upon.

A standard daily ration now had to last four days, and there weren't enough medical supplies to treat the wounded. The Cavalry's horses died in the freezing temperatures, which plummeted as low as -30° Celsius, and

the soldiers sawed up the frozen carcasses in order to cook the meat.

On top of the incredible suffering, their ammunition had almost run out, too. Efremov contacted the General Staff and asked if they could retreat, but General Zhukov rejected the request. According to Zhukov, Efremov had ►

Inexperienced Soviets fought to the death

The infantry was the most vulnerable group in the Red Army. The soldiers there had minimal training and were led by inexperienced officers. Nor did the Red Army boost its units with reserves as they dwindled. The units fought until everyone was dead or the few survivors left transferred to new units.



Helmet

Only the luckiest men got an American-style helmet. The rest had to settle for a cap.

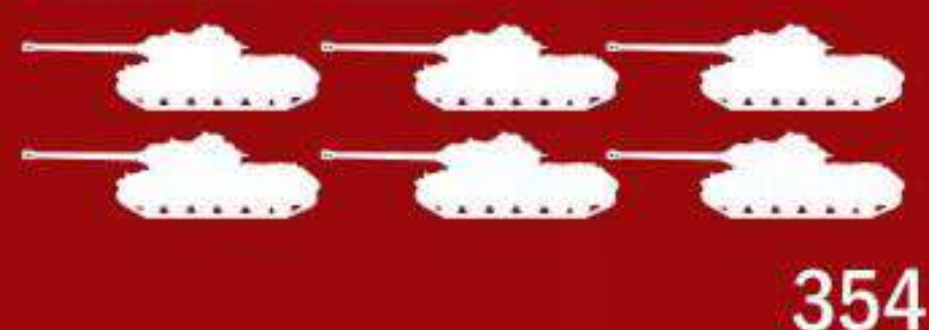
Rifle

The standard weapon was the reliable Mosin-Nagant 91/30 with a five-shot magazine.

Footwear

Good boots were in short supply. Privates often stole them from dead German soldiers.

SOVIET TANKS



SOVIET SOLDIERS



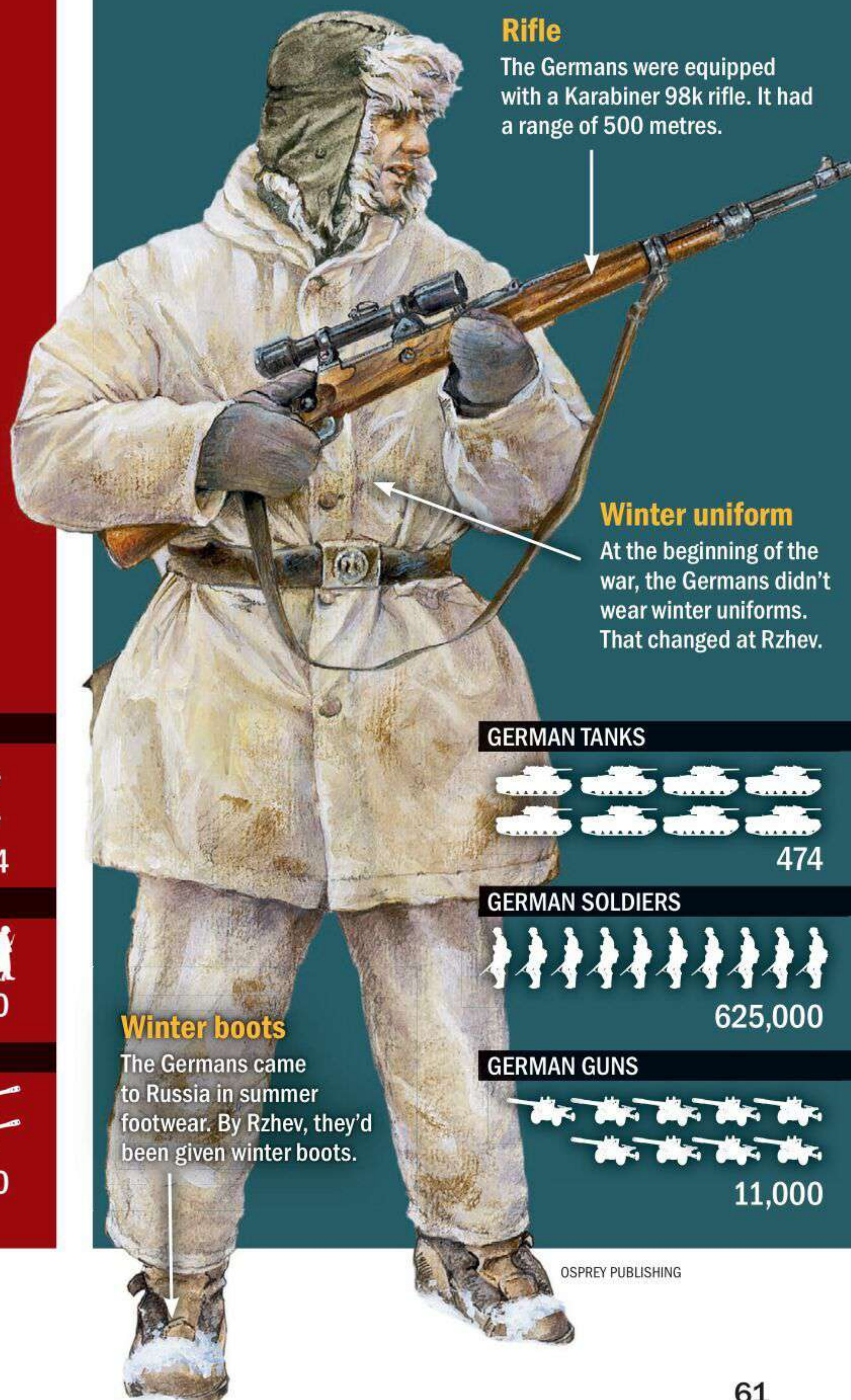
SOVIET GUNS



BBC.VOC.COM

Germans ran out of soldiers and guns

The Wehrmacht was Europe's most advanced army, but the Germans – unlike the Red Army – didn't have an unlimited number of soldiers to sacrifice. This meant that, as the war progressed, the army became weaker and weaker, and lost its strength for offensive operations.



Rifle

The Germans were equipped with a Karabiner 98k rifle. It had a range of 500 metres.

Winter uniform

At the beginning of the war, the Germans didn't wear winter uniforms. That changed at Rzhev.

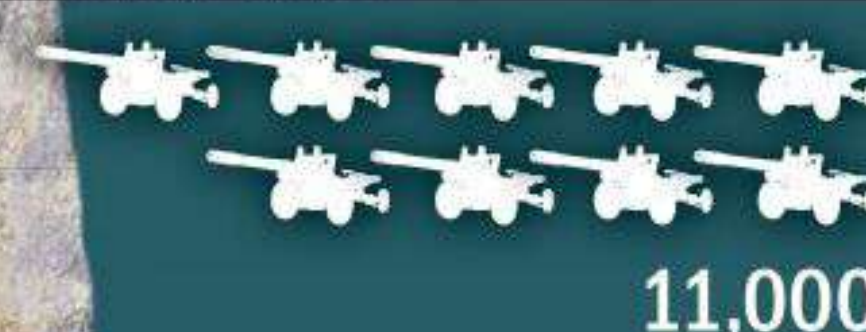
GERMAN TANKS



GERMAN SOLDIERS



GERMAN GUNS



Winter boots

The Germans came to Russia in summer footwear. By Rzhev, they'd been given winter boots.

OSPREY PUBLISHING

Red Army ran into a German deathtrap

The Germans' front line at Rzhev was organised as one powerful bulwark. All strategically important points were turned into bastions, connected by powerful lines of defence.

HISTORIE/CLAUS LUNAU

The first and second lines consisted of foxholes connected by trenches.

The Germans had rolled out barbed wire ahead of the front line.

The artillery was located 2–5 kilometres behind the first and second lines.

caused the problem himself – he should have defended his rearguard.

Efremov's surrounded troops were bombed constantly from the air. The 29th Army, which was supposed to cut the Germans off from the north, received the same treatment. Even its field hospital was wiped out by the Luftwaffe, whose Stuka bombers spread terror among the Red Army.

Soldier Vladimir Karpov later recalled how the sound of the aircraft's sirens drove the Soviet troops crazy; as

A total of 1.5 million Soviet soldiers lost their lives in the deathtrap at Rzhev.

soon as they started, he was paralysed by anxiety and even heard them in his dreams, describing the noise as the sound of death.

The Luftwaffe dominated the air, and by the end of January, the 29th Army had lost 80,000 men and had to withdraw. All the survivors were frostbitten and wounded, noted one army nurse: "There was not a single healthy one among them."

Soviet was German role model

Meanwhile, the situation worsened for Efremov, whose besieged army was dying. The General Staff, however,

was of no help, and each call to Zhukov received the same reply.

"Search for food locally ... search for shells also in place," he ordered. The starving soldiers ate bark, snow and roots while being fired upon constantly.

Later, soldier Yevgeny Nizovtsev recalled how they'd put small stones in their mouths to suck on to try to forget the hunger, while some tried to eat soil.

It wasn't until April that Zhukov gave permission to withdraw. But by then it was too late. Efremov's remaining men were exhausted and could no longer march the 150 km back. Surrounded by Germans, Efremov eventually shot

The Soviets' bloody mistakes

The Red Army's divisions failed to coordinate their attacks, making it easy for the Germans to beat back the Soviet forces.

himself rather than suffer the shame of surrendering to the enemy.

The Germans honoured the dead Soviet general with a hero's burial ("Fight for Germany as this man did for his country," General Walter Model urged his men), but Zhukov didn't ▶

The Red Army deployed blocking troops that shot any soldiers who dared try to retreat.

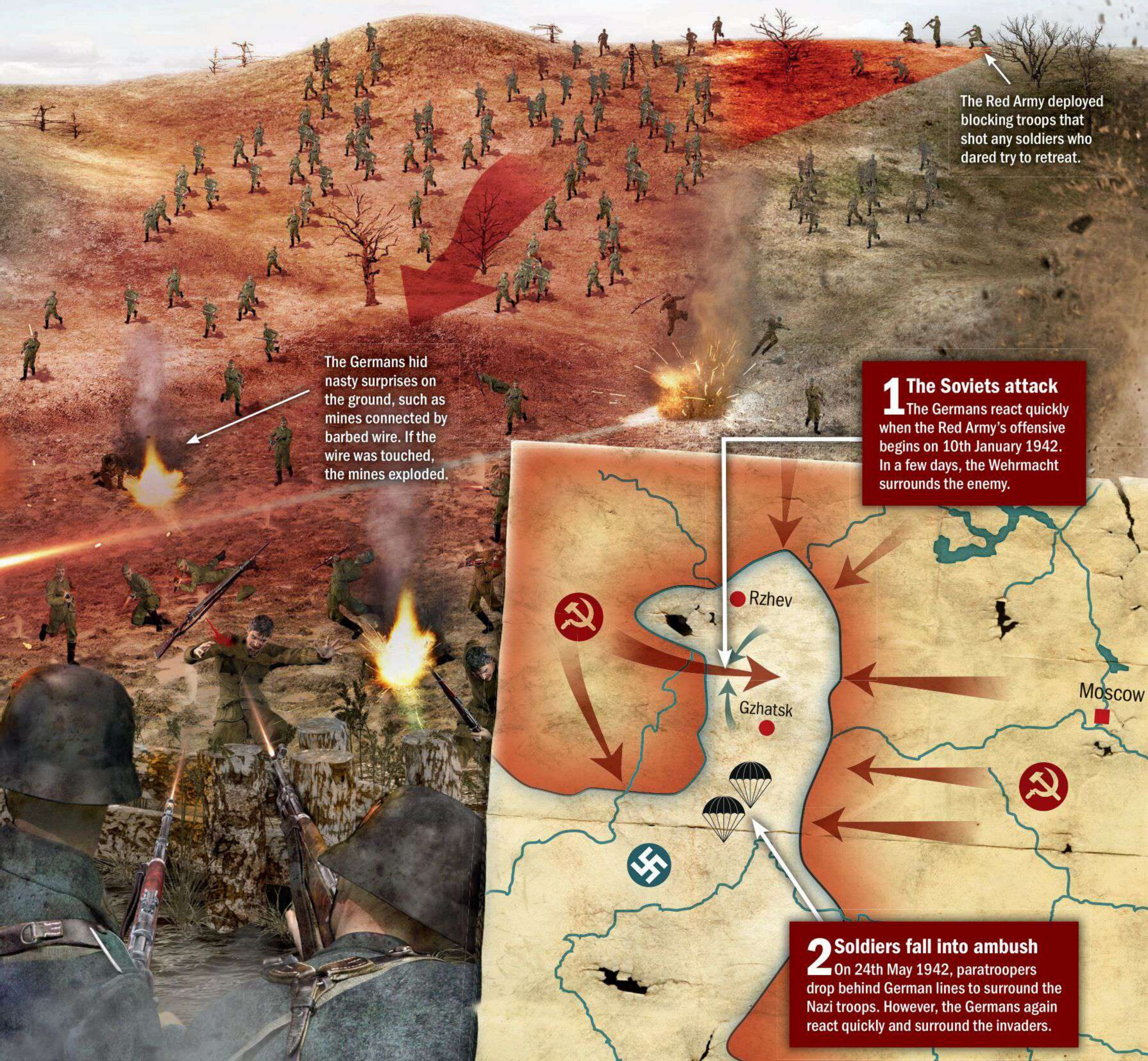
The Germans hid nasty surprises on the ground, such as mines connected by barbed wire. If the wire was touched, the mines exploded.

1 The Soviets attack

The Germans react quickly when the Red Army's offensive begins on 10th January 1942. In a few days, the Wehrmacht surrounds the enemy.

2 Soldiers fall into ambush

On 24th May 1942, paratroopers drop behind German lines to surround the Nazi troops. However, the Germans again react quickly and surround the invaders.



Rzhev was bloodier than Stalingrad

The Red Army's rank and file dubbed the area around Rzhev the "meat grinder". The 15-month slaughter was one of the Eastern Front's bloodiest battles, and not even Stalingrad could match it.

The total number of casualties from Rzhev was not made public – even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The information was kept secret in the defence ministry's central archive until 2001, when it came to light in a statistical analysis of the Soviet Union's wars during the 20th century. However, historians do not yet consider the death toll complete, as skeletons are still being dug up in the forests around Rzhev.

RZHEV WAS CALLED "MEAT GRINDER":

	RZHEV	STALINGRAD
Duration:	15 months	7 months
Deaths:	c. 1,500,000	c. 480,000
Wounded:	c. 910,000	c. 650,000



Unidentified bodies are continually found at Rzhev.

spend any time mourning the loss of a general. Together with Stalin, he prepared the next stage of the offensive, which by then had cost 300,000 men.

The 11th Cavalry Corps had been surrounded since February and paratroopers were going to be sent in to help. However, poor organisation weakened the plan – during the month of May, only 1,663 men arrived. Again and again, the corps asked for more help. It never came, and the entire 11th Cavalry Corps of 16,000 men made a chaotic attempt to break out. Along the route, wrecked vehicles, dead horses and human bodies soon piled up.

"The groans of the wounded [were] ... heartrending," noted survivor Vladimir Poliakov.

Soviet soldiers were sacrificed

Meanwhile, German officers received a directive from Berlin: the Führer demanded that the Rzhev salient be kept at all costs. Therefore, on 2nd June 1942, the Germans launched Operation Seydlitz to clear the pocket of surviving Soviet troops.

The Wehrmacht sent special forces of defectors and Russian-speaking soldiers into the forests, where they spread false information among the starving and confused Soviets, who again and again found themselves surrounded. On 12th July, Operation Seydlitz ended: 30,000

The Soviets' bloody mistakes
The Soviet General Staff was unwilling to withdraw vulnerable forces, costing thousands of Soviet soldiers their lives.

Soviet soldiers had been captured and 187,700 killed.

"Now ... to gather strength and create a continuous line of defence again," said General Horst Grossmann of the German 6th Infantry Division.

But if the Germans thought they could rest, they were wrong. Stalin cynically planned to deplete the Nazi forces at Rzhev, because the Red Army had discovered that Germany was preparing an attack on Stalingrad.

By tying up as many German troops as possible in the Rzhev outpost, Stalin wanted to ensure that the Nazis would be unable to give Stalingrad their full attention. The Stavka's next major campaign was therefore both an attack and a diversionary manoeuvre.

However, the Red Army's summer campaign in 1942 got off to a bad start. It rained incessantly for 10 days, turning the terrain into rivers of mud. When Boris Gorbachevsky arrived at the front in July and crawled into a trench, it was already half flooded.

The soldiers wore sodden clothes day and night. And along with severe levels



of hunger, fever and pneumonia caused the Red Army to grow even weaker. The operation continued, however, and on the evening of 29th July, the Stavka issued a radio warning to the locals to evacuate. It was obvious to the Germans what lay in store.

On the day of the attack, most of the Red Army's tank units were stuck in the mud, and the infantry were left to face the enemy's fire alone.

One German general noted in his records that he couldn't understand the way the Soviets used their soldiers, sending them out into the battlefield like cows to be slaughtered.

Germans fought three battles

At a village south-west of Rzhev, Gorbachevsky's shrapnel injury gave him a way out of the meat grinder. In the field hospital, he felt the frustrations of the other wounded soldiers – no one understood why the dead weren't being buried, or why there were no planes to protect them. But no one dared mention it to the officers for fear of reprisals.

Every day, soldiers who had shot themselves in the hand or foot to escape the battlefield flocked to the hospital, to the frustration of the medical staff. Gorbachevsky lay in a tent packed with the wounded. He tried to find out how the battle he'd been in had ended, and why capturing the village was so important, but no one had an answer.

What he did learn was that Stalin had given an order which

would turn the soldiers' nightmare at Rzhev into absolute hell. Order no. 227 became known as "Not a step back".

"To retreat further means to destroy ourselves and, along with that, to destroy our Motherland," were the words that caused Gorbachevsky to blanch. The order meant that the Soviet generals had to deploy blocking troops; anyone who tried to retreat would be shot by his own army. And in the worst battles at Rzhev, penal battalions were thrown at the enemy; prisoners of war, criminals and deserters could earn their freedom if they survived the battlefield. No one did.

But Stalin's human sacrifices bore fruit. Slowly, the Red Army began to advance, and – after another 300,000

mortalities – were only six kilometres from Rzhev at the end of August.

The Germans were struggling. Stalin's suicidal tactics had also led to huge German losses. Meanwhile, Nazi troops were advancing on Stalingrad. Combined with the siege of Leningrad and the Battle of Rzhev, the Germans were now fighting three major battles on the Eastern Front at once. Their resources were stretched to the extreme.

Basic equipment was lacking

While Gorbachevsky's wounds healed, the Red Army marched to within a few kilometres of Rzhev. Every village on the way was held in an iron grip by the Germans, and the Soviets sacrificed thousands of soldiers to take just ►

Retreat was a tactical masterpiece

Hitler wasn't usually in favour of retreats – even if they provided a tactical advantage. After the defeat at Stalingrad, however, he had to compromise and save the troops at Rzhev.



The Germans withdrew gradually

The Germans abandoned the area near Rzhev on 1st March 1943, because they wanted to save resources by shortening their front. Earlier, in February, they'd prepared such a comprehensive withdrawal that Operation Büffel was later put on the curriculum of German military academies. The Germans gained enough time for four retreats by laying mines on all the roads and blowing up bridges, including a railway bridge near Rzhev. Hitler wanted to hear it being destroyed, so his men rolled out kilometres of telephone cable so that the Führer could hear the explosion in Berlin.

German machine gunners were placed at all strategic points of importance.

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX

Soviet artillery was severely short of ammunition. On average, each gun was fired only twice a day.

SPUTNIK IMAGES/POLFOTO



one. The 30th Army continuously attacked the same small village from the same side for 20 days – until a new officer took command, attacked from the other side, and took the village in two hours. Stalin's purges among his officers in the 1930s meant that men such as school teachers, whose only experience was commanding students, were now considered qualified to be officers.

In October, Gorbachevsky was finally ready to fight again. He was sent to a regiment with the rank of lieutenant. His new boss welcomed him – drunk: "If you have to, resist to the last man, and don't count on any help, as there is no one left to fight." Gorbachevsky's small division numbered only 20 men and lacked basic equipment. At night, they had to crawl out into the woods and pull the boots off dead Germans, which they dubbed "God's gifts".

Germans tricked Red Army

The days got shorter and colder, and Gorbachevsky's division slept in damp foxholes in collapsed trenches. Only a few hundred metres away, the Germans were living in heated bunkers complete with electricity. At 06.00 they drank coffee and ate breakfast, then proceeded to taunt the Soviets over their loudspeakers: "Let's fight!"

In November, Gorbachevsky's division arrived at the bank of the Volga, where they moved into the Germans' abandoned trenches. "Hitler's beasts" had retreated to the opposite shore, from where they tried to entice the Soviets every day via their loudspeakers: "Come over to our side! We will hold our fire until 6 o'clock in the morning. We'll be having breakfast at 06.30." The Germans repeated the message several times a day, and sometimes used a Soviet soldier who had defected to tempt them: "They're giving us French chocolate, Dutch cheese and Danish ham to eat."

The Red Army lacked everything from tobacco to helmets. Yet Stalin's starving army continued to advance, threatened by its own blocking troops.

But Gorbachevsky's unit couldn't cross the frozen Volga, as the Germans shot them on the ice. When the Red Army finally reached Rzhev's city limits, Gorbachevsky had to celebrate the last

The Soviets' bloody mistakes

The artillery lacked ammunition and was unable to weaken German defences. Soviets therefore ran into a deathtrap.

day of 1942 on the Volga.

The Red Army now shelled Rzhev from morning to night.

The fighting went back and forth in the city streets, and each captured house cost hundreds of Soviet lives.

"After four weeks, it is now impossible to recognise a single building ... A cratered landscape has arisen in place of [Rzhev]," noted General Grossman.

Despair descended upon the Soviet soldiers. The streets were packed with corpses and the number of wounded was catastrophic. The situation seemed impossible. Then the news of the German defeat at Stalingrad reached them – and a wave of hope washed over the Red Army. A triumphant cry spread like wildfire among the soldiers. The broken men were comforted by the renewed promise of victory. Now the Germans were to be dealt a death blow.

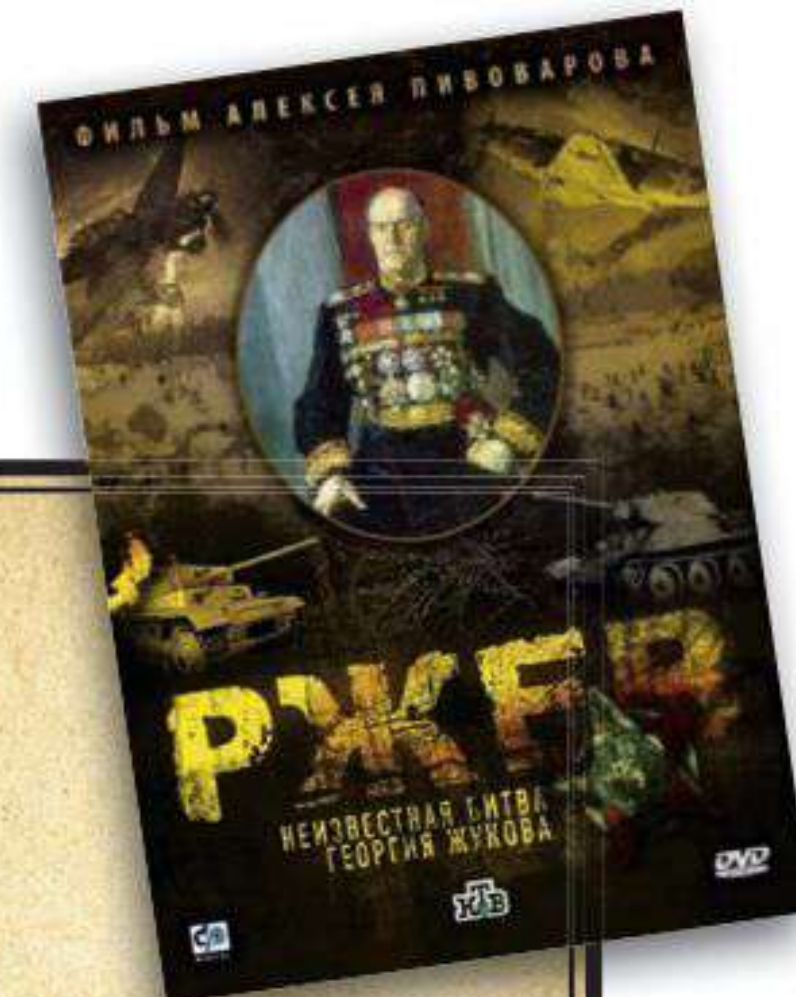
On the other side of the front, though, it was quiet. The Germans were preparing for a controlled withdrawal. Under cover of night, the Wehrmacht built 800 km of road, established new lines of defence 200 km to the west, and emptied the Rzhev salient of supplies and food. They mined the remaining buildings, blew up railway lines and conscripted 60,000 Soviet citizens as auxiliary troops. On 1st March, the Germans withdrew, and carried out a special order for Hitler on the way: the Führer wanted to hear the bridge over the Volga being blown up when his troops left Rzhev. So, his men rolled out kilometres of telephone wire and the explosion was heard in Berlin.

Stalin ordered the pursuit of the fleeing enemy. The

Truth came out finally

In 2009, Russian TV showed the documentary *Rzhev:*

General Zhukov's Unknown Battle by journalist Alexey Pivovarov. It revealed the horrific story to a wide audience for the first time – and sparked furious protests in Russia. Some called for Pivovarov to be jailed, and others proposed a ban on accounts that insulted the country's victory in World War II. The anger may seem incomprehensible, but it relates to the millions of lives the Soviet Union gave for victory over Hitler. Russians do not want to hear that the country's colossal sacrifice was due to mistakes.



Soviet troops marched on, and at the sight of the Germans' empty trenches outside Rzhev, they became intoxicated with victory: "Fritz has skedaddled!" On 3rd March, the Red Army finally entered Rzhev's bombed-out streets. Of the city's 5,000 houses, only 200 remained.

On 4th March 1943, the Soviet Information Bureau issued a statement: "Our troops have occupied Rzhev." All the mistakes had been forgotten, not least the 1.5 million Soviet soldiers who fell in the Battle of Rzhev.

FURTHER READING



• Boris Gorbachevsky: *Through the Maelstrom*, University Press of Kansas, 2009 • Svetlana Gerasimova: *The Rzhev Slaughterhouse*, Helion, 2013

The fighting in Rzhev was so fierce that virtually the entire city was razed to the ground.

SPUTNIK IMAGES/POLFO



The cold and fighting in Stalingrad were exhausting as the the German 6th Army was slowly obliterated by Stalin's forces. Only escape could save the 330,000 soldiers, but General Paulus stood firm. He'd promised Hitler to fight to the last man – and a German officer kept his word.

Of the original 330,000 men in Germany's 6th Army at the Battle of Stalingrad, only around 25-30,000 escaped. The rest fell in battle or ended up in Soviet captivity.

SOVIET UNION/JUNE 1942



In summer 1942, the Germans are ready to resume their advance through Stalin's Soviet Union. Hitler orders a large-scale offensive against the Caucasus's oil fields. On the way, the Führer splits the army in order to take Stalingrad, too.

STALINGRAD
1943

GENERAL PAULUS LED HIS ARMY TO

DEATH



Cold and hunger were as great an enemy to the besieged German soldiers as the enemy's bullets.

DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE/IMAGESELECT

BY KASPER TONSBORG SCHLIE & ANDREAS ABILDGAARD

Before dawn on 12th December 1942, three heavily loaded transport planes rolled down the runway in Morozovsk. When they'd gained enough speed, the German machines took off and set course for Stalingrad – 200 kilometres further east.

Wilhelm Adam had squeezed into one of the planes. Adam was an adjutant in the 6th Army and was sandwiched between boxes of ammunition, provisions and other supplies. Through the window, the adjutant could follow a trail of burnt-out vehicles on the ground – they stood as memorials to the struggle of the German armed forces to reach the important Soviet industrial city.

Adam's commander, the 6th Army general Friedrich Wilhelm Ernst Paulus, had demanded that the experienced

adjutant be flown in to the Nazi forces, which were surrounded by one million vengeful Red Army soldiers.

His plane had only just landed at the Pitomnik airfield, 15 km from the centre of Stalingrad, and the 49-year-old German could already tell that things were bad. The airfield was littered with scorched German fighter planes, bombers and abandoned vehicles.

As soon as Adam stepped out of the plane, wounded soldiers swarmed forward. Dishevelled and patched up with blood-stained bandages, they hobbled and crawled out of shell holes. They all hoped to get a lift out of the "cauldron" – as the encircled area was known – on a plane that would whisk them to safety in a German-held area.

The journey to 6th Army Headquarters was slow, because Adam's driver had to

zigzag between bomb craters, abandoned trucks and German corpses lying frozen on the snow-covered ground. Here and there, Adam also saw emaciated horse carcasses with gaping wounds – hungry German soldiers had cut out chunks so they could chew on the meat.

An hour later, Wilhelm Adam stood before General Paulus at 6th Army HQ, at Gumrak train station. "Head and shoulders were more strongly bent forwards than before. There was disappointment in his words," Adam later recalled in his memoirs.

The adjutant had brought an order from German High Command: soldiers were to be nominated for honours and promotions, to raise the morale of the besieged army. The order seemed totally absurd to Paulus. In recent weeks, he'd asked Hitler to save the 6th Army

Friedrich Paulus was involved in the planning of the German summer offensive in 1942.

SCHERL/RITZAU SCANPIX



from obliteration in the “Stalingrad Cauldron”, but all responses from the Führer had been discouraging. In fact, they sounded like a broken record: “6th Army is fulfilling its historical role by fighting to the last round to enable the construction of a new southern front,” read Hitler’s message.

Paulus was a soldier through and through, but in winter 1942-1943, doubt gnawed at him. On the one hand, he wanted to order a breakout from Stalingrad more than anything else. If he succeeded, he could potentially save hundreds of thousands of lives. On the other hand, the general couldn’t reconcile himself to the idea of betraying the Führer, who’d ordered him to fight to the last. Paulus was caught between a rock and a hard place.

German success on Eastern Front

Hitler had started the war against the Soviet Union in June 1941. The offensive was dubbed Operation Barbarossa, and in the first months, the three million-plus men of the German armed forces went from victory to victory. Army Group North surrounded Leningrad, Army Group Centre advanced towards Moscow, and Army Group South stormed through Ukraine.

In October, more than one million Germans in Army Group Centre reached the outskirts of Moscow, but then the Red Army launched its counter-attack.

In the battles that followed, Germany lost 174,000 men, and in January 1942, the Führer had to abandon his attempts to capture the Soviet Union’s capital.

The following summer, Hitler turned to a new goal: he ordered a major attack on the Caucasus to conquer the Soviet oil fields. Army Group South’s tanks rumbled across the arid Russian steppe on 28th June, defeating the Red Army.

Fall Blau (Case Blue) was set to be a success, but on 23rd July, a message from the Führer’s HQ arrived: half of Army Group South was to head towards Stalingrad. The city on the

banks of the River Volga was a vitally important industrial town, which produced, among other goods, T-34 tanks. The fact that the city was named after Stalin would only increase the attack’s propaganda value.

The 6th Army was to be the spearhead of the assault – led by 51-year-old Lieutenant General Friedrich Paulus, who’d only been in command for half a year. Until that point, Paulus had been a staff officer and had never been in charge of a unit of more than 300 men.

Paulus was thus the youngest and most inexperienced general in the entire 6th Army. Hitler, however, had confidence in the intelligent treasurer’s son from Kassel, who had demonstrated his strategic abilities during the planning of the attack on the Soviet Union the previous year.

Together with the 4th Panzer Division – as well as Romanian, Hungarian and Italian units – the 6th Army fought its way to Stalingrad. The closer the troops got to the major city, the stronger the

Red Army’s resistance became.

In August, Paulus lost so many soldiers that he sent Wilhelm Adam to Werwolf headquarters, in western Ukraine, where Hitler was staying. Adam was to insist on reinforcements for the 6th Army. The following day, the adjutant returned.

“Now Adam, what did you achieve at Führer Headquarters?” asked Paulus. Adam replied that the high command couldn’t send fresh soldiers for another four months. “So it seems I have to take Stalingrad with fought-out divisions,” sighed Paulus.

The battle began

Lack of manpower or not, on 23rd August, Paulus gave the order to attack the city. The Germans crossed the River Don 60 km from Stalingrad, while 500 Luftwaffe aircraft bombarded both factories and residential areas.

Despite fierce resistance from the Soviets, the 6th Army fought its way ►

Paulus rose through ranks

When World War II began, Friedrich Wilhelm Enst Paulus was just an insignificant desk-bound general. A few years later, he starred in one of the bloodiest battles in world history.

Paulus was born in 1890, the son of a treasurer, and grew up in the German city of Kassel.

During his officer training, the young Friedrich Paulus displayed an impressive talent for strategic planning, before he was sent as a 24-year-old lieutenant to fight in France and later in the Balkans during World War I.

During the interwar period, Paulus rose through the ranks and in 1938 became part of Panzer General Heinz Guderian’s staff working to develop the Wehrmacht’s new blitzkrieg strategy.

The panzer general described his new officer colleague as “brilliantly clever, conscientious, hard-working, original and talented”.

But Guderian also believed that Paulus lacked experience in the field and could be hesitant. That is why he was nicknamed “The Waverer”. In

1941, Paulus was appointed deputy commander of the German general staff, where he helped plan the attack on the Soviet Union. Operation Barbarossa was a huge success in the first months, and it was there that Hitler noticed Paulus’s great talent.

In November of that year, there was a shortage of experienced generals on the Eastern Front, and Field Marshal Walther von Reichenau – Paulus’s friend and protector – helped him obtain a promotion to panzer general.

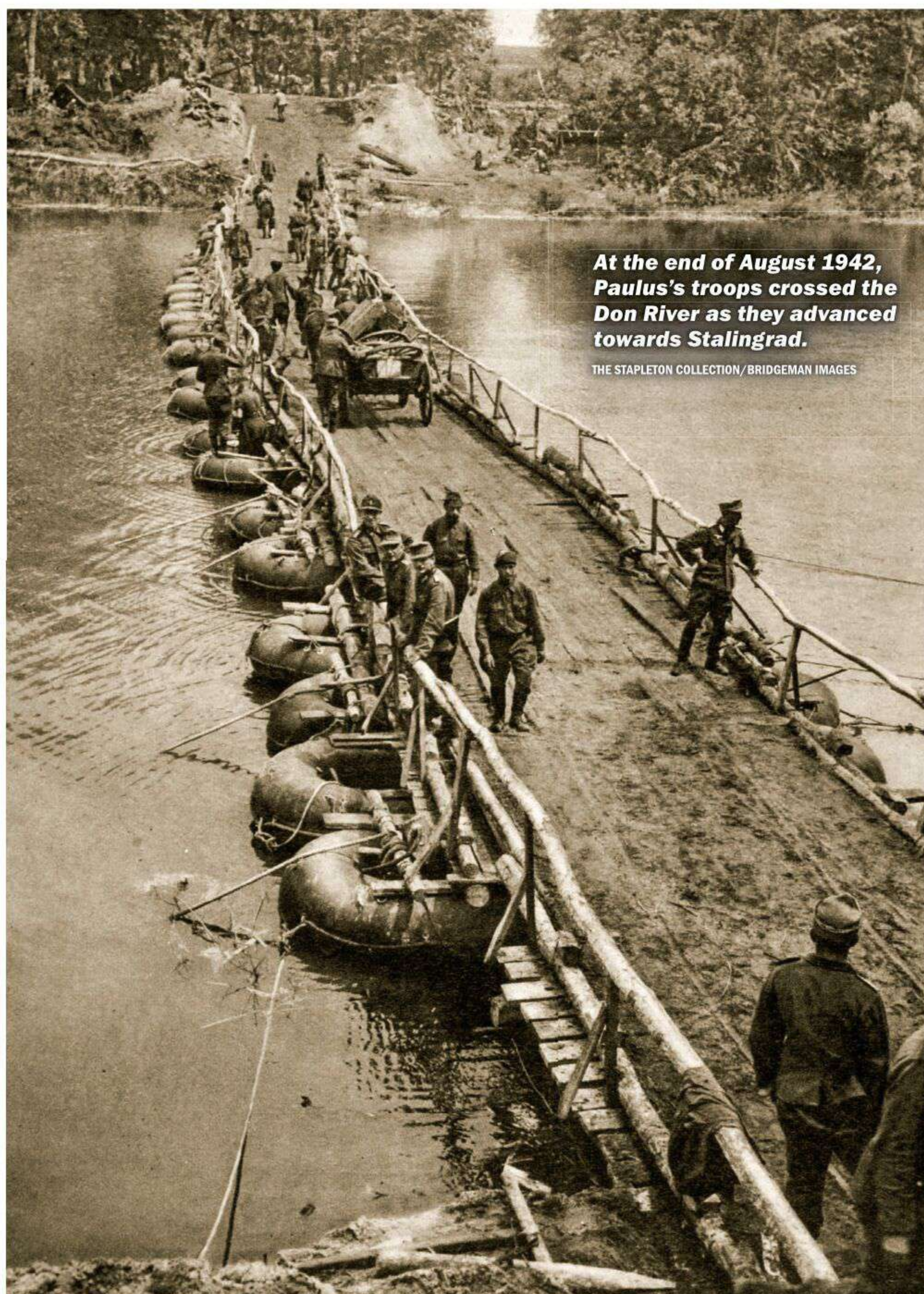
When Reichenau

died in January 1942, Paulus took command of the 6th Army – 330,000 soldiers now took orders from the 51-year-old general.



“So it seems I have to take Stalingrad with fought-out divisions”

Paulus before the attack on Stalingrad (August 1942).



At the end of August 1942, Paulus's troops crossed the Don River as they advanced towards Stalingrad.

THE STAPLETON COLLECTION/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

into Stalingrad from the north and south, forcing the Red Army to defend itself on several fronts.

Even with worn-out men, Paulus had expected a speedy victory, but the Germans had to fight from house to house, and were only able to advance a few metres each day.

The casualties were so great that the general had to establish a temporary cadet school behind the front, where engineering and artillery officers were hastily retrained as infantry officers. Hitler ignored the many victims, and instead of fresh soldiers, he sent a delegation of engineers to Stalingrad – to rescue machinery and

raw materials from the city's factories. Paulus could hardly believe his eyes.

"These people won't be able to get their hands on much. The Luftwaffe has destroyed everything. Even the factories are now only heaps of rubble," he indignantly exclaimed.

Shortly after, Hitler sent a commander to be mayor of the captured city, which caused the 6th Army staff officers to burst out laughing – they had nothing like control of the 5-km-wide and 40-km-long city on the River Volga.

Hitler refused to help

On 12th September, Paulus himself flew to Werwolf headquarters to talk to Hitler.

***"A sad chapter.
We have hardly taken
half the city"***

Paulus on the battles in Stalingrad (September 1942).

Paulus wanted to convince the Führer that the situation in Stalingrad would end in disaster because German High Command had underestimated the Red Army's strength.

Massive reinforcements were needed to gain control of the city and protect the weak flank to the north, Paulus pointed out. Hitler ignored the request – the Soviets had deployed their last reserves and would soon be defeated, the Führer claimed. Two days later, the Germans finally made it into the centre of Stalingrad, where the fighting intensified – in just one day, the main railway station changed hands five times.

Over the next few days, hundreds of German casualties were transported to a field hospital near the front. Wilhelm Adam, who was constantly driving around between the German units to pass on Paulus's orders, inspected the conditions at the field hospital.

"Amputees were dealt with first, then air pipe injuries, then came the stomach and lung cases," the adjutant noted.

A medical orderly came out of the operating room with a bucket. "[It was] filled with blood-soaked bandages, clothing and scraps of uniform, as well as a ... blue-black grained bone stump," Adam said. He felt sick from the "smell of ether, pus and blood".

Paulus predicted counter-attack

Back from Werwolf, Paulus could see that his premonitions were coming true: "The Army High Command ignored our warnings about the north flank," he told Adam. "That is why the situation has become even more serious. ... The enemy appears to be ready to attack into our deep flank."

There were several reports of a Soviet advance in front of the Germans' sparsely manned flanks to the north and south, where poorly equipped Romanian and Hungarian forces were standing. A simultaneous attack could result in a siege and the destruction of the entire 6th Army, Paulus predicted.

Shortly after, an artist sent by Hitler arrived, a handsome elderly gentleman from Leipzig, who was to immortalise the battle as a large panoramic painting, while the army itself was tasked with designing a memorial shield. The proposals made Paulus lose his cool: "A sad chapter. We have hardly taken half the city and batter through the rest with our head. With the ►

Germans captured within Soviet pincer

From June to December 1941, Adolf Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union was a success. The German soldiers reached so far to the east that they could see Moscow. However, the attack on the capital was repulsed, so Hitler divided the army and designated a new target: Stalingrad.

Together with his general staff, Hitler was busy planning the summer offensive on the Eastern Front in spring 1942. While Stalin expected another push against Moscow, German eyes were on a different target: the Caucasus.

By taking the region east of the Black Sea, the Wehrmacht would gain access to the Soviet oil fields, which could keep the Nazi tanks running. Fall Blau was launched on

28th June 1942 with 1.5 million Nazi soldiers. Again, the Germans were successful, causing Hitler to grow even more ambitious – now the industrial city of Stalingrad was also to be captured, with General Paulus at the helm. But although the Germans took 90 percent of the city, the operation failed. In November, the Red Army surrounded the Germans, and the 6th Army was subsequently annihilated.

SOVIET ENCIRCLEMENT NOVEMBER 1942

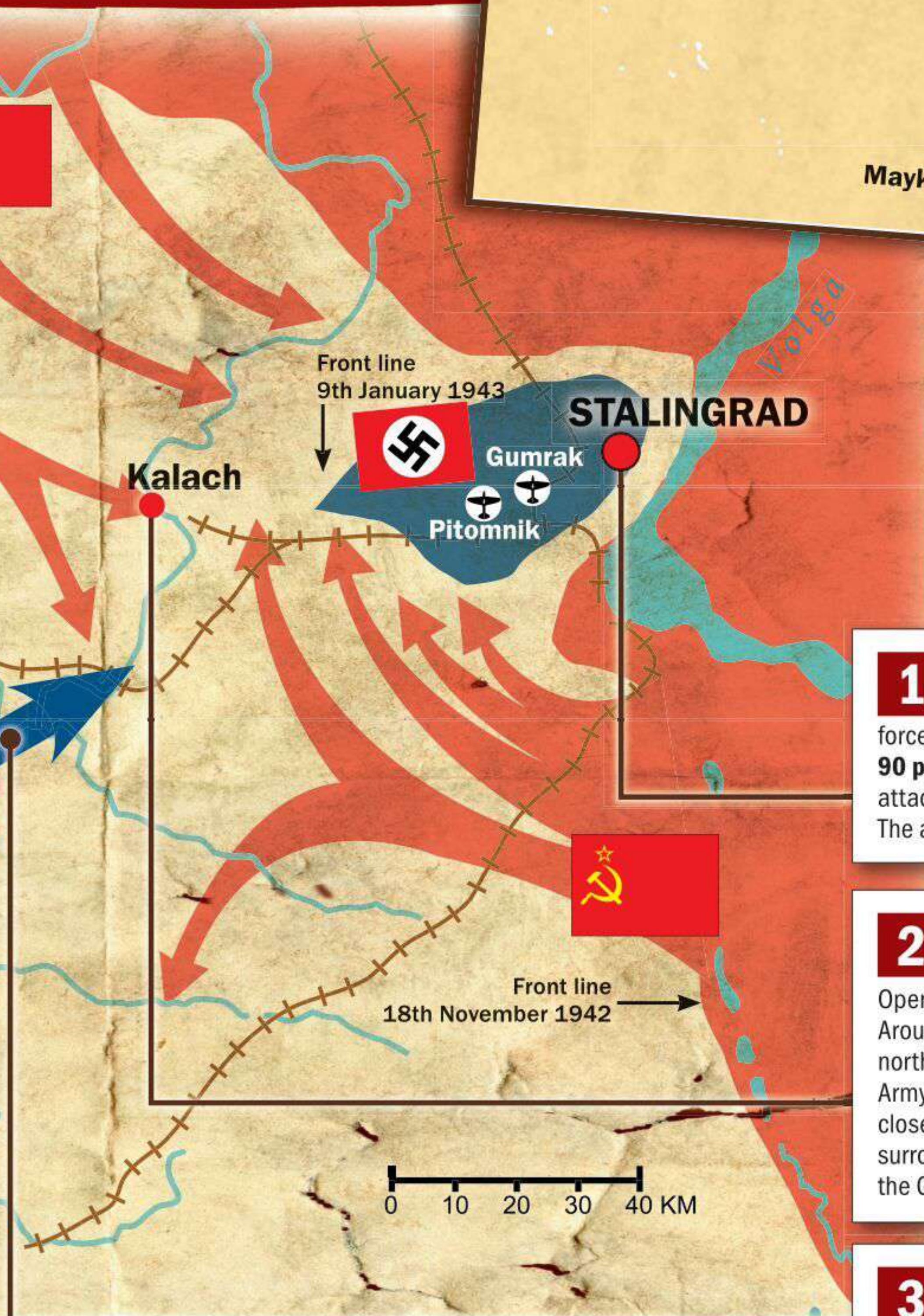
GERMAN ADVANCE SUMMER 1942



TASS/GETTY IMAGES, HISTORICAL/GETTY IMAGES & SHUTTERSTOCK



Hitler wanted Paulus to commit suicide. The field marshal let himself be captured instead.



1 Near-victory for Germany

On 6th November 1942, German forces under General Paulus capture **90 percent of Stalingrad** and launch an attack to dislodge the last Soviet units. The attack is repulsed.

2 Soviet pincer closes

The Red Army launches Operation Uranus on 19th November. Around **one million Soviets** attack the northern and southern flanks of the 6th Army, and after four days the pincer closes at Kalach. The 6th Army is surrounded but Paulus is told to maintain the German occupation of the city.

3 Rescue fails

Germany tries to rescue the 6th Army with Operation Winter Storm – around **50,000 men** must break the Soviet encirclement. The offensive begins on 12th December, but is **stopped on Christmas Eve**, 60 km from the city.

5 6th Army goes under

Soviet units fight their way to the 6th Army headquarters, and on 31st January, **Paulus is captured**. Over 90,000 soldiers end up in Soviet captivity – only around 5,000 survive. Further south, the Germans have to withdraw from the oil fields in Maykop.

4 "Surrender!"

The Red Army sends an **ultimatum to Paulus** on 7th January 1943. If the Germans surrender now, they will be treated well. Otherwise, they'll be wiped out. Paulus rejects the demand.

Goebbels worked overtime

In January 1943, the Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, was faced with the hardest task of his life: he had to relay the news of the 6th Army's destruction – without allowing the Germans to lose heart.

Adolf Hitler was certain that Germany would capture the Soviet city of Stalingrad. As recently as 8th November 1942, he'd stated: "I wanted to take it. And do you know, we're modest: that is, we have it."

But in the New Year it was clear to Hitler that the Soviets would win. On 13th January, he held a meeting with Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, where the men discussed how the disaster could be turned into a victory in the German newspapers. After eight hours of deliberation, the strategy was clear: the defeat in Stalingrad was to be presented as a necessary sacrifice to secure the final victory, to harden the resolve of the

German population. In the days that followed, the headlines read: "Hold fast – to the last man" and "The Führer honours the heroic band at Stalingrad."

Propaganda compared the 6th Army to the Spartans and their ill-matched struggle against the Persians, while Goebbels said "the word capitulation does not exist in our vocabulary" and Hitler declared three days of mourning.

The fact that over 90,000 Germans surrendered was kept secret. Instead, the papers wrote that the 6th Army had sacrificed itself to defend Europe

against Bolshevism.

The disinformation was discovered by Radio Moscow, which read out the names of the prisoners. Thousands of Germans listened in the hope of hearing the name of a family member.



"Sacrifice" and "final victory" became key words in German propaganda after Stalingrad.

Paulus had accepted his orders."

Soviets struck flanks

The disaster began on the morning of 19th November. For a few minutes, staff officers at 6th Army HQ had heard what sounded like a distant, persistent thunder when the phone rang. On a crackly call, the officers received titbits of information from General Strecker, who was based near the northern flank, where the Red Army had been moving large forces in recent weeks.

"All Hell's broken loose!" shouted Strecker. "An unimaginable drumfire is falling on our positions. The ground is being literally ploughed up. We have enormous numbers of casualties. The main blow appears to have hit the Romanians." He wasn't exaggerating.

The Romanian 3rd Army was in disarray; 3,500 shells and mortars from

Katyusha rocket launchers rained down on the poorly equipped soldiers, who after a few hours began to flee to the south. The Red Army had launched Operation Uranus – one of the largest pincer manoeuvres in military history.

General Paulus immediately moved units out of Stalingrad itself to stem the onslaught. That evening, he met with Adam to get an overview of the situation.

"He was pacing back and forth, bent over, across the room," Adam wrote.

Suddenly, the general looked directly at his adjutant: "Now has happened what I have been forecasting for weeks. Hitler does not want to accept as true what every simple soldier can see. ... We have no idea if it is possible to stop the Russian counteroffensive."

Before the day was over, thousands of Axis soldiers lay dead on the steppe north of Stalingrad. In addition, 27,000 Romanians had ended up in Soviet captivity, and Red Army tanks had penetrated 30 km behind the 6th Army.

The following day, the Red Army also attacked the Germans' southern flank, and the Soviets quickly made a large hole in the lines of defence. Now it was clear that the Red Army was trying to catch the Germans in a pincer movement.

"The danger facing us is gigantic. I see only one way out of this situation: turning away to the southwest. The fastest action is necessary," said Paulus at army headquarters. Adam pressed to evacuate the 6th Army: "In this case must the army really ask for a decision from the Army High Command? Here we are talking about the lives of almost 330,000 men!"

But General Paulus promptly rejected the suggestion: "There is still the order whereby no commander of an army group or an army has the right to relinquish a village, even a trench, without Hitler's consent. ... [H]ow will we get through the war if orders are no longer complied with?"

Paulus's army was surrounded

Just two days later, on 21st November, the Red Army's pincer was a few hours from closing in on the 330,000 Germans and their foreign allies.

In desperation, Paulus chose to send a message directly to Hitler. He begged to be allowed to break out of the ring and flee south before it was too late.

Several hours later, Paulus received a definitive reply: the 6th Army was to remain around Stalingrad, tying up as many Soviet forces as possible. Adam

present fighting state of the troops, it is hard to see us ever attaining the set goal. But they give hardly any thought to that at the High Command," he raged. "Instead they bring up such trivial matters as a Stalingrad shield."

Again and again, Paulus refused to pull his forces out of Stalingrad to fortify the flanks. Bent over his situation map, he exclaimed: "The general staff must know what is about to happen. Are there then only 'yes-men' in Hitler's entourage?"

The danger was imminent, but Paulus didn't dare order the reorganisation of his forces without the Führer's approval. "I ... fear the worst if the High Command does not produce battle-strength divisions," he confided in his adjutant.

Adam summed up the situation in his memoirs: "The fate of the 6th Army was decided at Führer Headquarters, and

was near the new front line, where unimaginable scenes unfolded: "Trucks, command vehicles, cars, motorcycles, riders and horse-drawn vehicles raced westwards, bouncing off each other, becoming stuck, tipping over, blocking the road. Between them thrust, pressed, shoved and wriggled those on foot. Anyone who tripped and fell on the ground did not get back up. They were trampled, driven over, crushed."

Huge amounts of equipment were left behind to facilitate the escape: field kitchens, guns, provisions, ammunition and vehicles were left on the roads and out on the steppe. When Soviet forces closed the pincer near the village of Kalach on 22nd November, they formed a barrier between Paulus's headquarters on the west bank of the River Don and the main force inside Stalingrad. But



German military police wore special winter mittens that made it possible to pull a trigger.

THE RUPTURED DUCK

Hitler refused to acknowledge the danger. Instead of ordering a breakout, he commanded Paulus to set up a new headquarters inside the cauldron.

Dutifully, the general boarded a small plane and flew towards the city. He landed safely in Stalingrad and established a new HQ at Gumrak train station, 10 km from the city centre.

Göring to supply army from air

It was here that Adjutant Wilhelm Adam met his commander again on 12th

December. Adam had remained with the forces west of the River Don after the encirclement, and now he was excited to hear any news. Paulus's body language said it all – he looked like a beaten man, pacing around his headquarters. Paulus reported low morale among the men.

Their will to fight was only sustained by the fact that Hitler was planning to open a corridor into Stalingrad – Colonel-General Hermann Hoth's 4th Panzer Army was on its way, Paulus explained.

Inside the Stalingrad cauldron, 270,000 men were still alive but cold, illness and lack of food now claimed more lives than the fighting.

Paulus confided in Adam that Hitler had briefly considered letting the 6th Army withdraw from Stalingrad: "The orders for the breakout were to be issued on the 24th November. There was nothing else to do. But in a conference with Hitler, Göring said that he was in a position to supply the 6th Army by air."

Hitler had eagerly grasped at the lifeline and ordered Paulus to fight on. But Göring's promise quickly proved ►

"The orders for the breakout were to be issued on the 24th November. But in a conference with Hitler, Göring said that he was in a position to supply the 6th Army by air"

General Paulus on Göring's promise to Hitler (December 1942).



The fighting in Stalingrad went from house to house, and the Soviet soldiers had to fight hard for every square metre in the bombed-out metropolis.

DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE/IMAGESELECT

to be overly ambitious. Every day, the 6th Army required 700 tonnes of provisions, ammunition and medicine, but even on good days, the Luftwaffe's decimated *Luftflotte 4* (Air Fleet 4) could only deliver quarter of that.

On the same day that Adam arrived at headquarters, however, Colonel-General Hoth was ordered to begin Operation Winter Storm: 50,000 soldiers and 250 tanks thundered through the Soviet lines, and some units travelled 50 km on the first day. Finally, help was coming.

Just three days later, hopes fell when the Germans encountered strong Soviet resistance at the small Cossack village of Verkhne-Kumskiy.

Rescue never arrived

The fierce battles in the fields around Verkhne-Kumskiy caused heavy losses on both sides. Hoth's men fought hard to break through the line of Soviet tanks – the Germans were just 60 km from their besieged comrades in Stalingrad.

Paulus's 6th Army had only enough fuel to move 30 km, so the soldiers had to wait for Hoth's men to get close enough that Hitler would give the code word "*Donnerschlag*" ("Thunderclap"). This would mean the 6th Army could try to break out to the south-west.

The wait was too long for several of Paulus's generals. Walther von Seydlitz-Kurzbach lost patience and criticised Hitler at a staff meeting. Paulus remained silent while one of those present threatened to shoot Seydlitz if he continued to incite mutiny.

Afterwards, Adam queried whether Seydlitz perhaps had the

right idea: "Would it not be right to get out of this damned mess against Hitler's orders and break out?" he asked.

Later that evening, Paulus stared thoughtfully into space: "I don't understand the Army High Command any more," he said. "It seems nothing has been learnt from the heavy blows of the last weeks. The composition of the Hoth army is a shattering example that the strength of the Red Army is irresponsibly underestimated."

All hope of rescue was finally shattered on 16th December when Stalin launched Operation Little Saturn, which was to push Army Group South even further away from the Caucasus, thus completely isolating Paulus's army from the rest of the German forces. The Soviets' assault caused morale to drop even further among the 6th Army's general staff.

Paulus no longer talked about if he'd have to capitulate – but when: "You will see, Adam, that whatever happens here I will be the one made responsible for it. Who will take into consideration that my hands were tied to their orders by superior headquarters?"

The chance to break out had gone, yet the 6th Army had to continue fighting, because Hitler still needed the efforts of the besieged soldiers in Stalingrad; they were to tie up as many Soviet forces as possible, so Army Group South had more time to escape from the Caucasus.

The situation resulted in chaos at the German-controlled Pitomnik airfield, where thousands of wounded waited to be evacuated. The Soviet air strikes on the runway cost hundreds of lives every day. Nevertheless, German planes managed to evacuate 25–30,000 injured soldiers during the siege.

On average, Göring's planes flew 90 tonnes of cargo to the army every day, but not everything was useful. An entire aircraft filled with medals and awards arrived – including 2,000 Croatian medals, despite there being fewer than 1,000 surviving Croats left.

Other aircraft carried four tonnes of pepper and marjoram, three tons of sweets and 200,000 bags of propaganda material. "I ... wish the bureaucrats responsible only had eight days of experience in the cauldron," the quartermaster ▶

The Soviets produced a newspaper for the German prisoners of war so they could read about the defeat.

JOHN FROST NEWSPAPERS/IMAGESELECT

The German soldiers lost comrades daily to enemy bullets during the fierce fighting.

MICHAEL CREMIN/IMAGESELECT



***"I ... wish the bureaucrats responsible
only had eight days of experience in the
cauldron. Then they would no longer do
such imbecilic things."***

Quartermaster to adjutant Adam, referring to the
propaganda material the 6th Army received instead
of food, weapons and medicine (December 1942).



complained. "Then they would no longer do such imbecilic things."

Paulus rejected ultimatum

On Christmas Eve, the situation became even worse. The Red Army captured the Tatsinskaya airfield west of the city – including 74 German transport planes. Göring's vital airlift was now reduced to a few aircraft a day.

The lack of food and the loss of all hope of rescue caused several units to fall apart. Paulus received a disturbing report about the 200,000 or so soldiers still alive. "Since the failure of the relief offensive became known, the will to resist has fallen drastically," it read.

On New Year's Eve, Hitler sent a message over the radio and promoted

strings of officers. The promotions secured higher pensions for the soldiers' future widows, which was intended to strengthen morale.

Paulus himself was promoted to colonel general. The next day, 40 fresh soldiers arrived by plane as a kind of New Year's gift from Hitler. Forty men who couldn't change the situation, but simply meant that

there were more mouths to feed in the cauldron. Thereafter, Paulus refused to receive any further reinforcements.

On 7th January, Stalin judged that the Germans were particularly fragile. That day, an ultimatum reached Paulus: the Germans had to surrender immediately, otherwise "the forces of the Red Army and the Red Air Force will be compelled

"Hitler expects ... that I commit suicide. What do you think about that, Adam?"

Paulus on the Führer's expectation of his death (January 1943).

to take steps to destroy the encircled German troops".

Paulus hesitated for two days – then he said no, and the Soviets responded the very next day. Artillery, planes and tanks attacked the German cauldron, which was now only 15 km by 20 km.

German fronts collapsed

Paulus had missed the last chance to save his men, and the realisation hit him hard. There'd be no more hesitation; anyone who tried to sneak aboard a plane to escape now would be shot.

When Soviet tanks arrived at Pitomnik airfield on 12th January, those Germans still standing fled into the shattered city, where fighting continued from house to house. Now the army could only be supplied via the small Gumrak airfield.

The remnants of the 6th Army immediately prepared the airfield to receive transport aircraft, but Luftwaffe pilots refused to fly that far into Stalingrad. Hundreds of their comrades had already been shot down over the city, and the risk was even greater at Gumrak, where the Red Army's anti-aircraft guns could easily hit them. Paulus was furious, and radioed Hitler: "My Führer, your orders for the supply of the army are not being carried out."

He never received an answer. Early on 24th January, Paulus wrote again to Hitler about the army's impossible situation: "Troops without ammunition and supplies. Elements of the 6th Division still reachable, indication of disintegration on the southern, northern and western fronts. No unified following of orders possible any longer. ... 18,000 wounded without the slightest aid of bandages and medicines. The 44th, 76th, 100th, 305th, 389th Infantry Divisions destroyed."

The message ended with a crystal-clear message: "Collapse imminent. Army requests immediate capitulation in order to save remaining lives."

Hitler replied after an hour: "Capitulation out of the question. 6th Army is fulfilling its historical role by fighting to the last round to enable the construction of a new southern front."

He also had an ulterior motive: 30th January would mark 10 years of Nazi power, and the fall of Stalingrad could not be allowed to spoil the celebrations.

In the days that followed, the 6th Army disintegrated – as Paulus had predicted. Generals fell in battle, the cauldron was split into three separate areas, and bombs rained down incessantly on the Germans

One in 18 prisoners returned home

During the Cold War, in 1955, the Soviet Union wanted to repair relations with West Germany. But Chancellor Konrad Adenauer had a condition for the talks: the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had to release the remaining German prisoners of war. Soon, 9,626 Germans returned home from the Soviets' labour camps. Of those, close to 5,000 were survivors of the battle at Stalingrad – around one in 18 of those taken prisoner.

The Red Army captured over 90,000 soldiers, but half of the prisoners

perished on winter marches to camps in icy Siberia, where they were forced to work in mines and quarries. Toiling for 12 years, thousands perished due to the hard labour and work accidents.

Others died from diseases such as typhus. Only about 5.5 percent of those captured from the 6th Army were alive by the time of the release. Researchers believe that the prisoners from Stalingrad were treated particularly harshly – on average, more than half of German prisoners survived life in the Soviet camps.

Long marches to Soviet labour camps cost the lives of many starving German soldiers.



in the already devastated city. But not everyone accepted their dreadful fate; on 26th January, General Walther von Seydlitz-Kurzbach chose to surrender his units.

Soviets came knocking

German HQ had to move into the cellars of a ruined department store on 26th January, because the Red Army was advancing rapidly through Stalingrad.

"Hitler expects especially from me that I commit suicide. What do you think about that, Adam?" Paulus asked.

"Until now we have tried to prevent suicide in the army," Adam replied angrily. "This is and remains the right thing to do. You too have to share the fate of your soldiers. ... I would ... regard it as shameful and cowardly should we end our lives by suicide."

Paulus agreed – on that point, Hitler would not get his way.

A final radio message was sent from Stalingrad on 30th January: "On the anniversary of your seizure of power, the 6th Army congratulates its Führer. The swastika still flies over Stalingrad."

Early the next morning, Soviet T-34 tanks reached the department store. The Germans sent a soldier bearing a white flag out into the street, and shortly after there was a knock on Paulus's door.

General Arthur Schmidt, Paulus's chief of staff, stepped in and handed over a radio message that had just arrived from Hitler. It said that General Paulus had just been promoted to field marshal.

"That is just an order to commit suicide, but I will not grant this favour," Paulus said as he read the text, knowing that no German field marshal had ever been captured alive by an enemy.

The chief of staff spoke: "I have to tell you that the Russians are outside."

A few seconds later, a Soviet general entered the room and declared that Field Marshal Paulus was now officially in the custody of the Red Army.

Postscript: After Paulus's surrender, the fighting in the ruins of Stalingrad raged on for four more weeks as 10,000 Germans chose to fight to the last bullet.

Adjutant Wilhelm Adam settled in the GDR in 1950. He had become a Communist and sat for 13 years in the East German parliament.

Field marshal railed against Hitler

During his captivity, Paulus helped make propaganda for the Soviet Union. After the war, he settled in the GDR.

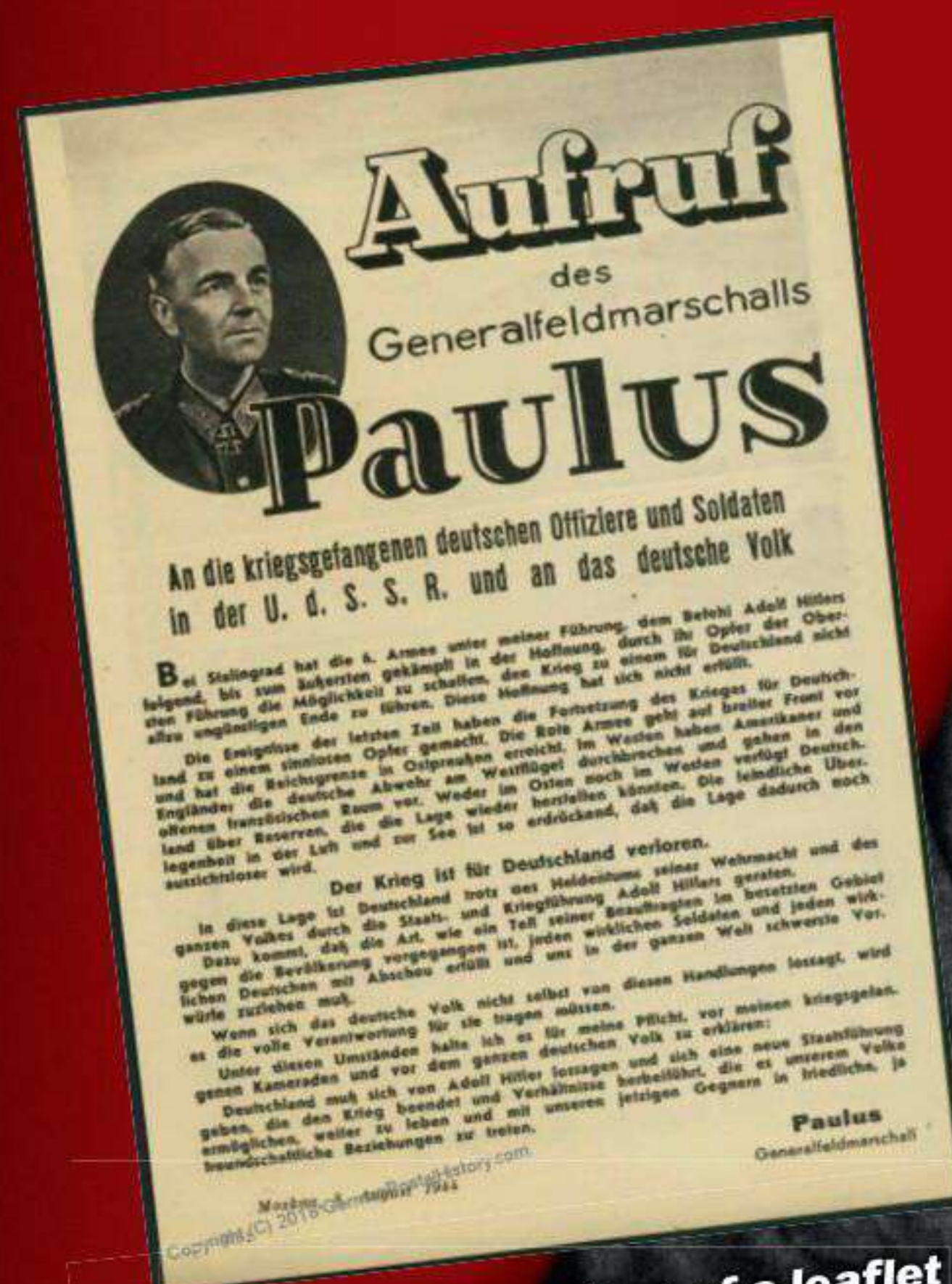
After the defeat at Stalingrad, Paulus ended up in Soviet captivity. The field marshal lived in quite comfortable conditions with other German officers, and for a year and a half he kept a low profile.

Only when he heard about the assassination attempt on Hitler in July 1944 did the loyal field marshal choose to break his silence. The following month, he spoke out against Hitler on Radio Moscow. While Paulus was speaking, the Soviets dropped leaflets on German forces. A picture of Paulus was printed on the pamphlets, along with text that demanded peace. "Germany must rid itself of Adolf Hitler and get a new head of government to end the war," he said.

During the war crimes trial in Nuremberg, he appeared as a witness

and said, among other things, that the German prisoners of war in the Soviet Union were fine. When he was released in 1953 and set foot on German soil, he was met by his old adjutant, Wilhelm Adam.

Paulus's collaboration with the Communists and Soviet Union meant that he settled in Dresden in East Germany, where the regime gave him a magnificent villa and let him work as the head of a war history research council. Friedrich Paulus died of ALS in 1957. At his request, he was buried in West Germany, beside his wife, who'd died eight years earlier.



Paulus was the author of a leaflet dropped on German forces in August 1944. In it he stated that the war was lost.



After the war, Paulus lived in the East German city of Dresden.

FURTHER READING




• Wilhelm Adam & Otto Rühle: **With Paulus at Stalingrad**, Pen & Sword Military, 2017 • Heinrich Gerlach: **Breakout at Stalingrad**, Apollo, 2018

EASTERN FRONT



History's largest

TANK

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a Soviet tank. The tank's turret and main gun barrel are visible, angled towards the left. The background is a solid, vibrant red, and a large yellow hammer and sickle emblem is partially visible in the upper left corner. The tank's tracks and road wheels are in the foreground, showing some detail and texture.

IN HIS FINAL OFFENSIVE ON
the Eastern Front in 1943,
Hitler ordered the German
Army to capture the city of
Kursk. But the Soviets were
well prepared. The battle of
Kursk resulted in thousands
of tanks clashing to the
south of the city.

BATTLE

BY JEPPE NYBYE

Soviet soldier Pavel Krylov drowsily shielded his eyes and looked up at the silhouette of a man trying to shake him from his slumber. The soldiers in the cramped trench near the village of Prokhorovka, approximately 100 kilometres south of the city of Kursk in Russia, were ordered to get up. After more than a week of gruelling battles against German forces on the Eastern Front, 20-year-old Krylov was lucky to be alive, but the early call before dawn on 12th July 1943 heralded yet another day on the battlefield.

"One hour before the attack. Eat something," commanded the unknown figure. The events of the day that followed would be the worst of Krylov's entire life. Before long, history's biggest ever tank battle would transform the region's beautiful, golden cornfields into a bloody inferno.

Pincer to overcome the enemy

Just over a week earlier, on 4th July 1943, the German commander-in-chief on the Eastern Front had ordered his forces to mount a large-scale summer offensive to secure Nazi Germany's victory in the east and restore morale after the crushing defeat at Stalingrad six months earlier. The Third Reich's foremost strategist, Erich von Manstein, had devised a pincer manoeuvre, code-named Operation Citadel, to surround the Red Army's advancing front at Kursk. In this way, the Germans would



JULSTEIN BILD

Hitler ordered 2,928 tanks and self-propelled guns to capture the area around Kursk. The attack was Germany's largest tank assault on the Eastern Front.

decrease the Soviet Union's own opportunities for a summer offensive, shorten the front line and give the war-weary German troops much-needed respite. In the best blitzkrieg style, the Germans would overpower the enemy with lightning-fast surprise attacks.

But on the other side of the front, the invincible Soviet Marshal Georgy Zhukov had known about the Germans' plans for months, thanks to a secret agent within the enemy's ranks. A plan to break the German Army once and for all was carefully prepared. Using six lines of defence, the Red Army would sneak up on the attackers and destroy the dreaded tanks that formed the Wehrmacht's backbone. The Germans would have to aim well – for every Soviet soldier shot, five fresh ones would march forward. The price of Zhukov's strategy would be an unprecedented loss of materiel and human life. But unlike the enemy, the Soviet Union could quickly replace those losses. Nazi Germany, on the other hand, would lose its dominance on the Eastern Front forever.

Germans broke through defence

With General Walter Model and Colonel General Hermann Hoth at the helm in the north and south respectively, the German forces were already biting through the lines of

defence on 5th July. But even though Hoth and his soldiers had reached just 25 kilometres south of Kursk, the Red Army leadership's confidence remained intact. Admittedly, the Germans had broken through the first three and most heavily fortified lines of defence, but there were still three more, and soon Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov would stop them permanently at the village of Prokhorovka.

Luftwaffe surprised Soviet forces

After seven days of intense fighting, Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov drove through Prokhorovka. It was just before dawn on 12th July 1943, and all was quiet on the battlefield. The officer only stopped when he reached the 29th Tank Corps' position, south of the small town, on a hill covered with fruit trees. From here, Rotmistrov had a perfect view of the battlefield filled with ripened cornfields, across which the Psel River wound like a serpent. He panned his binoculars over the Soviet troops and then let his gaze fall on the enemy. Almost 600 tanks from three SS panzer divisions were facing him. But he had 900.

Naturally, Rotmistrov's men were growing impatient. However, just as the clock ticked past 06.00, and he was about to issue the order for the Soviets' planned surprise attack, a swarm of German fighter planes appeared like a black cloud in the already overcast sky. Several bombers swiftly followed on their tail – the Germans had outsmarted him. The ominously silent battlefield suddenly erupted in a deafening roar as bombs rained down on the Soviet troops. Rotmistrov watched as the ►



"The next two or three days will be terrible. Either we hold out or the Germans take Kursk"

Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's political representative at Kursk

Nazis wanted to cut off Kursk

The Germans wanted to surround the front-line Soviet troops at the city of Kursk using a giant pincer manoeuvre code-named Operation Citadel. General Walter Model was to attack from the north and General Hermann Hoth from the south, until they reached Kursk in the middle.

CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIE



Model struck from north

General Walter Model oversaw all five corps of both infantry and armoured divisions and an air fleet. The strategy was to let the infantrymen clear the way before the German tanks rolled forward.



Model's ambition to reach Kursk in under ten days was dashed.



Kursk's answer to Stalingrad

On 7th July 1943, German and Soviet forces clashed in the town of Ponyri. Here the Soviets showed their strength in a battle that lasted until 12th July. The Germans' futile struggle and huge losses evoked memories of Stalingrad.



SOVIETS

TROOPS 1,910,361



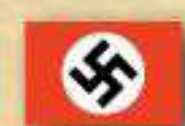
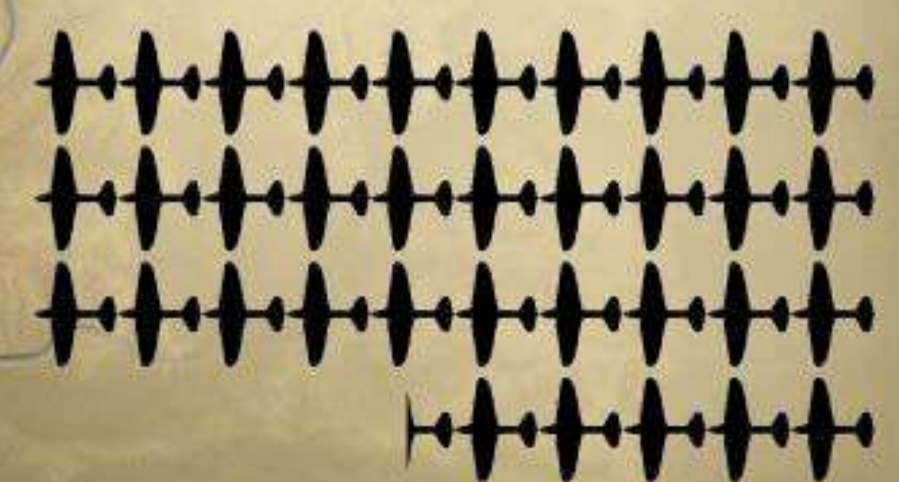
TANKS 5,128



ARTILLERY 25,013



AIRCRAFT 3,549



GERMANS

TROOPS 780,900



TANKS 2,928



ARTILLERY 9,966



AIRCRAFT 1,800



Hoth attack from south

Colonel General Hermann Hoth realised that his 4th Panzer Army's weakness was a critical lack of infantrymen. So he sent his tanks – about 35 per kilometre of front line – forward as an “armoured wedge” into the Russian defences.



Soviets let Nazis bleed to death

The Germans had more luck to the south than the north of Kursk, advancing faster than the Soviets expected, but on 12th July, the Red Army launched its deathblow against the German summer offensive during the Battle of Prokhorovka.

OBSTACLES FOR GERMANS

ESPIONAGE revealed attacks

In April 1943, spy Rudolf Roessler, code-named Lucy, intercepted the Nazis' plans to take Kursk, and immediately passed the confidential information to Moscow. A mere 24 hours after Hitler had ordered the operation, Stalin knew about it. Roessler never revealed his source, who was just known as “Werther”, but suggested that he was a senior officer in the German Army. Even today, no one knows who Werther was.

HITLER delayed operation

Everyone in the German general staff knew that a victory at Kursk had to be secured with a swift surprise attack. Yet Hitler repeatedly postponed the operation, firstly because of muddy roads, but also because of the Soviet fortifications. The Führer wanted to wait for his new ‘wonder weapons’, such as the Panther, Tiger and Ferdinand tanks that were due off the production lines. The attack was postponed from mid-April to 5th July.



By postponing the attack several times, Hitler lost the element of surprise.

GETTY IMAGES

German tanks began heading towards his lines.

In the trench of Soviet soldier Pavel Krylov, who'd been so rudely awakened that morning, the men were preparing to charge towards the enemy. Out of the corner of his eye, Krylov suddenly caught sight of one of the German dive-bombers – a Stuka – before it plummeted and released its deadly cargo. He heard only a warning cry and then saw the ground in front of him rise up. If Krylov hadn't known better, he'd have thought that a giant had grabbed hold of the battlefield and shaken it. Dazed, he heard a roar of orders to stand up. Krylov was just coming to his senses when he looked towards the enemy's lines and, to his great horror, saw a tightly formed row of enemy tanks approaching like a tidal wave.

Rotmistrov's plan to strike first had crumbled. He found only a little consolation in the fact that the German tanks were driving straight into the storm of shells and rockets that had been planned to precede his own surprise attack. However, the German tanks – led by the fearful Tiger I – were spreading out, to avoid becoming easy targets. The vehicles' caterpillar tracks churned up dust and soil, leaving deep tracks through the yellow cornfields, which would soon be burning. At 06.30, the Soviet bombardment stopped as planned, and Rotmistrov finally gave the order to attack.

"*Stal! Stal! Stal!* (Steel! Steel! Steel!)" he commanded, and the Soviet tanks moved into gear. Gradually, they gained speed and rolled towards the enemy. Rotmistrov had previously ordered his tank drivers to drive at full speed, or they risked being blown to pieces by the German tanks' long-range 88-mm guns before they even entered combat.

Grey-purple smoke warned of attacks

On the other side of the front, at around 06.45, SS company commander Rudolf von Ribbentrop tried to get an overview of the battlefield from the vantage point of his Panzer IV tank. He was the son of Nazi Germany's foreign minister and, despite being only 22 years old, had already excelled in battles against the Red Army in Finland. In front of him – behind a broad hilltop – rose clouds of exhaust fumes. Along the entire ridge, he could see the same grey-purple danger sign, which could

T-34 The Soviet's trump card

After costly experiences in previous wars, the Soviets developed a tank that enemy ammunition simply bounced off. The T-34 became the Red Army's most successful tank during World War II.

Firepower

The 76.2-mm gun could be lowered by three degrees and raised by 30. It was fired using a foot switch, and could reach up to 1,800 metres.

Armoured plates

The tank was equipped with 47-mm armour on the front, 45-mm on the sides and rear, 65-mm on the sides of the gun turret and 47-mm on its rear.

Crew

The T-34 was manned by four soldiers: in the front was a driver/mechanic and a machine gunner/radio operator; in the turret was a commander and a loader.

OSPREY

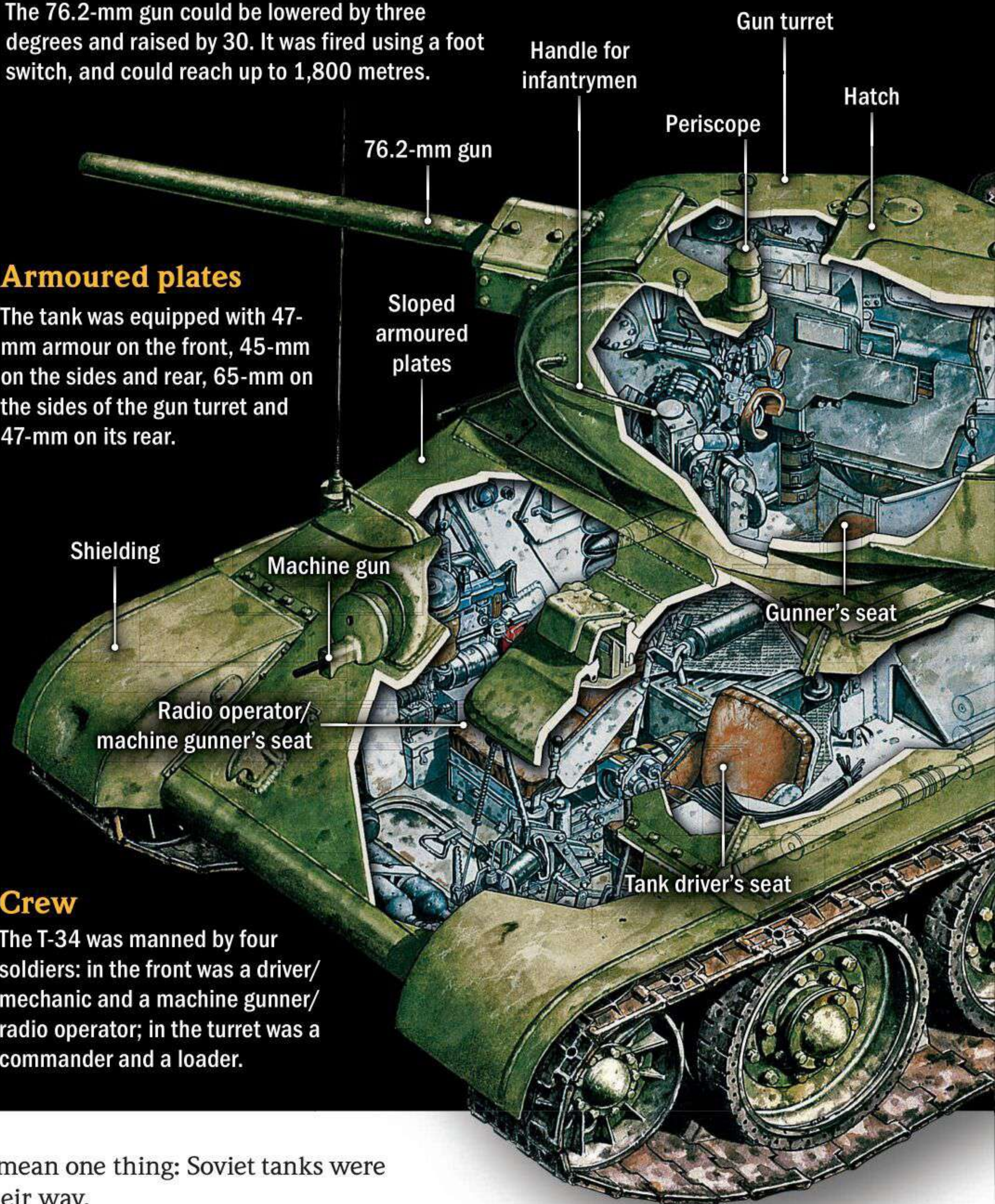
only mean one thing: Soviet tanks were on their way.

Ribbentrop radioed orders to his company to drive up the hill, and at the top he encountered the first Soviet T-34 tank, which was trying to cut off a number of German infantrymen on a hill 200 metres further on. Practised as they were in fighting, Ribbentrop's men soon found themselves following a familiar routine: the tank stopped, Ribbentrop specified a target, and the gunner fired a shell at an enemy tank. The process took only a few seconds, and within moments, Ribbentrop's company had destroyed several tanks, leaving the Soviet crews fighting a

desperate battle against the fire that was about to engulf them.

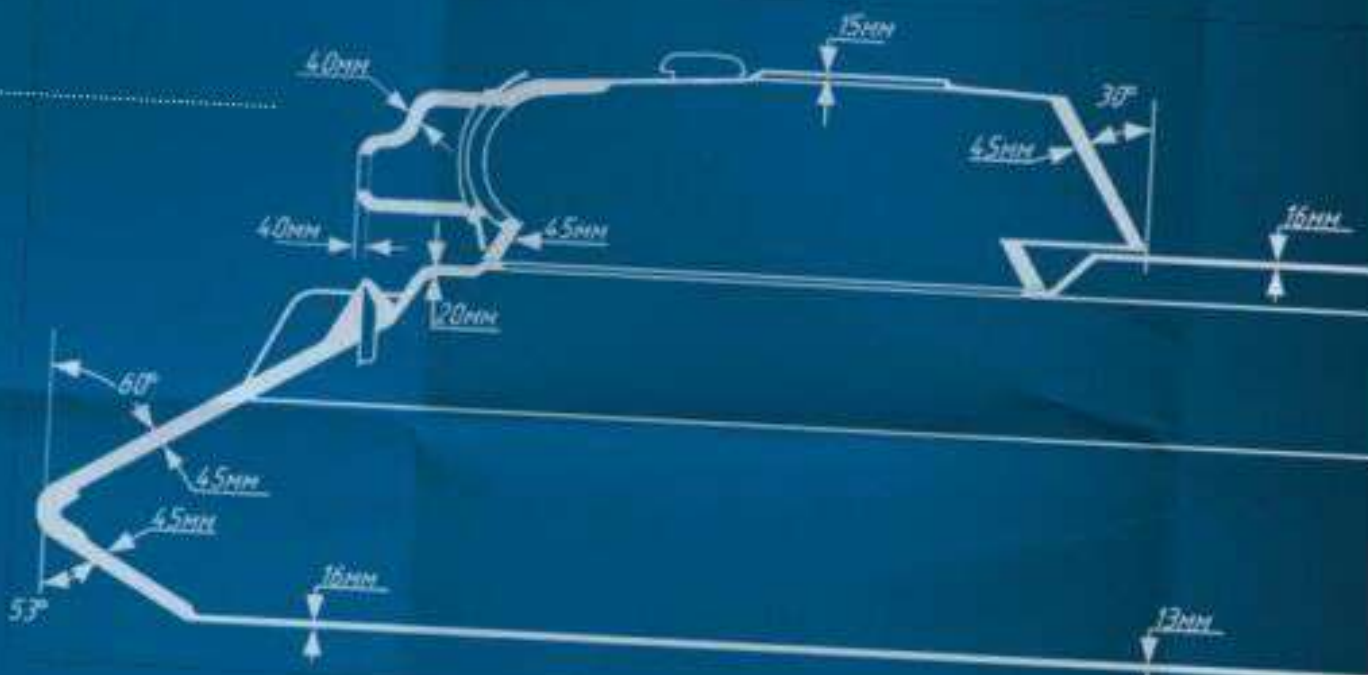
Out of habit, Ribbentrop looked around and was met by a sight that struck him speechless. In front of him he first saw 15, then 30, and then 50 tanks. Eventually, there were more than he could count. Soviet troops were hanging off the sides of the T-34s, using handles on the tanks' hulls.

Ribbentrop's tank quickly fired a mortar at a T-34 that was just 50 metres away. Flames enveloped the vehicle, and its crew roared as they threw

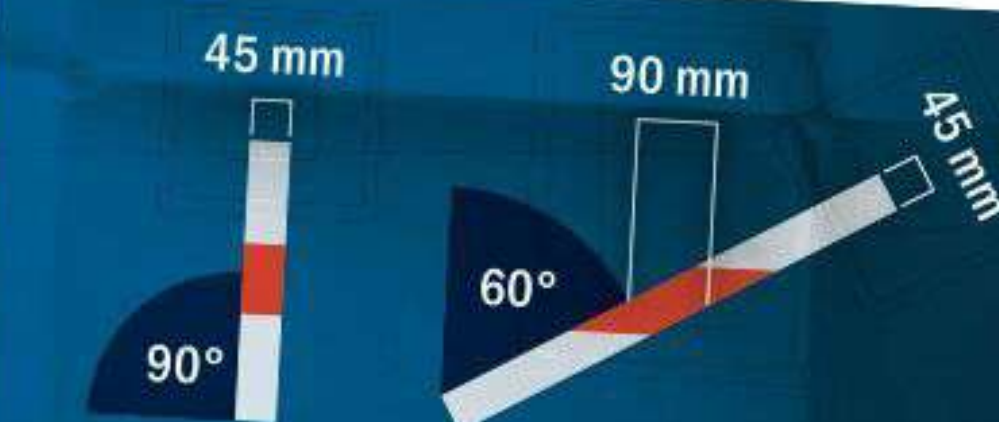


T-34 tank

Crew 4
Length 6.73 m
Width 2.92 m
Weight 30.9 tonnes
Top speed 55 km/h
Horsepower 500
Fuel 0.65 km/l
Weapons 1 x 76.2-mm gun,
4 x 7.62-mm machine guns



Sloped armour twice as strong



MOST TANKS had vertical armoured plates.

THE T-34 was equipped with sloped armour, which gave a 45-mm plate the same strength as 90-mm armour.



Air filter

Radiator

38 litres of fuel

Handle for infantrymen

Camouflage net

Drive wheels

Wheel

Caterpillar track

Most manufactured tank

Over 35,000 T-34s and nearly 20,000 T-34/85s rolled out of factories during the war. The tank was constructed from fewer parts than previous models, so was easier to build. The Soviets produced more T-34s than any other tank.

German tanks were meant to secure victory in the east

Hitler ordered up to 2,928 tanks and self-propelled guns to move into position to capture Kursk in Operation Citadel. Four models dominated the German divisions.

Panzer III

Weight 23 tonnes
Top speed 45 km/h
Horsepower 296
Weapons 1 x 50-mm gun,
2-3 x 7.92-mm machine guns

The Panzer III, with a crew of **five**, and the Panzer IV, made up the majority of the German tanks during Operation Citadel.



Panzer IV

Weight 26 tonnes
Top speed 45 km/h
Horsepower 296
Weapons 1 x 75-mm gun,
2 x 7.92-mm machine guns

Over **8,800** Panzer IVs rolled out of German factories between 1936 and 1945. It was the Germans most widely used tank.



Tiger I

Weight 54 tonnes
Top speed 40 km/h
Horsepower 690
Weapons 1 x 88-mm gun,
2 x 7.92-mm machine guns

The Tiger I was the star of the German panzer forces; its 88-mm gun could pierce a Soviet T-34 at **1,646** metres.



Panther

Weight 23 tonnes
Top speed 48 km/h
Horsepower 690
Weapons 1 x 75-mm gun,
2 x 7.92-mm machine guns

Despite high expectations, **16** out of **200** Panthers had to be abandoned due to mechanical problems before the battle.



themselves from the burning deathtrap. Suddenly, the company commander heard a loud boom. The German tank right next to him had been directly hit on the hull and flames quickly took hold. Ribbentrop saw one of his good friends manage to get out of the vehicle, but then quickly turned his attention to the oncoming Soviets. The tsunami of Red Army tanks rolled on relentlessly. Tank after tank. Wave after wave.

Shells pierced tanks

From his command post, Rotmistrov eagerly observed his tanks ploughing into the German panzer formations at high speed. The heavy machines

circled around each other in a dance of death. Neither side had time to move into a more favourable attack position. Shells sliced through the tanks' hulls like knives through butter. Rotmistrov could hardly tell which side was attacking and which side was defending. The only things that he could identify through his binoculars with any certainty were the burning ►

"Every officer and every man must recognise the significance of this attack. Victory at Kursk must serve as a beacon to the world"

Adolf Hitler immediately before the Battle of Kursk



German tanks were lured into traps

As early as March 1943, the Soviet Army leadership, Stavka, suspected that the Germans would attempt to capture Kursk. Stalin ordered 300,000 workers to construct an ingenious defence system of minefields, anti-tank ditches, trenches and strategic lookout points from which Soviet troops could ambush the Germans.

WAYNE SOUTHWELL/CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIE & RGAKFD

2

Germans forced together

With a carefully planned obstacle course of minefields, deep ditches and natural barriers such as lakes, the Red Army **funnelled the Germans into prepared killing zones** that the Soviets could easily observe, and where the Germans were particularly vulnerable.



Deep anti-tank ditches held back the German tanks. The Nazi troops had to construct makeshift bridges to cross them.

Rifles neutralised tanks

Anti-tank rifles could pierce armour up to 40 mm thick. The Panzer III and IV were therefore at risk.

Traps not just for defence

Behind each line of defence, the Red Army placed divisions that could go on the counter-attack.

Tanks lay in ambush

The Soviets hid 5,100 tanks and mobile artillery pieces behind strategic ridges.

1

Lookout spotted the enemy

In preparation for the attack, the Soviets had built a 175-km-wide fortification consisting of six heavily strengthened lines of defence with around **5,000 km of new trenches**. Protected underground, Soviet soldiers could easily move from one position to another. Lookouts kept an eye on the enemy and were able to warn of attacks via radio.

Soviet Lieutenant General Vasily Kryuchenkin keeps an eye on the German forces at Kursk.



Mines dug into fields

As many as 503,633 anti-tank mines were hidden in the grain and sunflower fields along the front at Kursk. The minefields channelled the enemy towards the death zones.

Ditches stopped tanks

Deep ditches with steep sides served as an effective barrier against the German tanks.

Mortar position

From the trenches, specially trained Soviet soldiers aimed 20,000 82-mm mortars and guns at the panzer divisions.

Guns pierced tanks

6,000 Soviet 76-mm anti-tank guns awaited on strategic hilltops.

Soviet anti-tank gun

3

Soviets sprung the trap

On command, the first soldiers stationed at a good vantage point fired anti-tank guns at the German tanks in the trap.

The attack served as a signal for all the other Soviet units in the area to launch an infernal assault.



AKG IMAGES

Six out of ten German tanks on the Eastern Front were used in Operation Citadel in an attempt to capture Kursk. Here they fight in the crucial Battle of Prokhorovka.

tanks that were lit up like torches in the scorched fields.

Krylov was grateful for the fact that his division had already been preparing to attack when the Germans had started to advance. If the Wehrmacht had attacked just one hour earlier, all would have been lost. Even so, the Germans managed to push Krylov's division back more than 400 metres.

Out of ammunition

In Rudolf von Ribbentrop's view, it was only a matter of time before his

infamous tanks defeated the Soviet T-34s. But a desperate cry from inside his own tank interrupted his thoughts:

"No AP [armour-piercing ammo] left." Whenever the loader needed more shells, the Panzer IV tank had to stop so that the gunner, radio operator and driver could hand him fresh ammunition from the store. Ribbentrop knew full well that if the tank stopped, he might as well have signed his own death sentence, so he ordered the driver to turn around and move behind a hill that offered slightly better cover. But before they could get that far, a T-34 showed up and stopped just 30 metres to their right. The enemy's turret was aimed at Ribbentrop, who found himself looking down the gun barrel. His own tank, however, was unable to fire, as the loader had only just received the new supplies of armour-piercing shells and was still stowing them.

"Step on it, now!" roared Ribbentrop. Immediately, the tank started up and manoeuvred around behind the enemy so only ten metres separated the two machines. The German gunner couldn't miss. The mortar hammered right into the enemy's gun turret, which flew three metres into the air.

Although Ribbentrop's company transformed plenty of tanks into

twisted wrecks, the onslaught seemed endless. And the commander's own vehicle was right in the middle of it. Ribbentrop, however, had an advantage: every German tank – unlike Soviet ones – had a radio. By calling his men, he might be able to prevent them from confusing him with the enemy.

"All stations: ... Don't fire at us!" he repeated over the radio. No answer.

The area was no longer a battlefield, but a slaughterhouse. Everything was alight, enveloping both enemies and comrades in smoke. An indescribable stench hung in the air. The Soviet T-34s shot at will and shelled each other.

Ribbentrop turned around

Krylov climbed a hill. All around him the bodies of the dead lay in unnatural positions while the wounded cried for help. Some Soviet infantrymen further back provided a little support fire, but the German shelling was fiercer. Only at 13.00 did the Soviet artillery manage to get the Germans in their cross hairs from a strategic hilltop and send a rain of shells down on the SS soldiers. Several T-34s thundered up the slope, which they finally captured.

On the German side, Rudolf von Ribbentrop again heard the ominous message from inside the tank: "No AP left." The supply of armour-piercing ammo had run out again, so instead, Ribbentrop ordered his tank to target the Soviet infantrymen who, like the tanks, appeared in an endless stream. Suddenly Ribbentrop heard a large boom and shortly after a roar.

"My eye! My eye!" yelled the gunner. A shell had just hit the tank's sight. Luckily, it didn't penetrate the turret, but it hit the periscope with such force that the gunner was seriously injured.

Ribbentrop's Panzer IV tank was unable to fight on without a gunner, but it had destroyed at least 14 Soviet tanks. Hundreds of wrecked vehicles lay behind him as his tank drove to safety.

Stalin raged over lost tanks

Rain hammered down as darkness settled over the battlefield. Pavel Rotmistrov could hear scattered gunfire in the distance, but he was more concerned about the storm of fury that the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, was directing at him: "What have you done to your magnificent tank army?" Stalin demanded over the field



"The Russians have learnt a lot since 1941. They are no longer peasants with simple minds. They have learnt the art of war from us"

German general Hermann Hoth, immediately after the tank battle at Kursk

telephone. The question hung in the air, making Rotmistrov fear for his life. Stalin wasn't even aware of the whole truth: that 650 tanks had gone up in smoke in one day, while the Germans had lost just 17. Rotmistrov knew that, with his crippled vehicles, it would be impossible to go on the offensive the next day, so ordered his men to dig in.

Germans kept in check

Lightning split the dark night sky with white flashes, and the boom of thunder replaced the bangs of shells. Despite the reprimand from Stalin, Lieutenant General Rotmistrov rejoiced at the storm, because by the next morning, 13th July, the battlefield had become a

sprawling quagmire that the German tanks could only traverse at a crawl. Rotmistrov let his artillery blast shells down on the advancing Germans, and the broken caterpillar tracks of the first Nazi tanks soon got stuck, while others steered directly into the minefields. Infantrymen were still advancing, but when 'Stalin's organs', as the Germans had nicknamed the Katyusha rocket launcher, fired their mortars, they fled.

To his delight, Rotmistrov also awoke to the news that the Allied landing in Sicily, which had begun on 10th July, had been a success. More than 160,000 soldiers had secured a bridgehead in advance of the forthcoming invasion of mainland Italy. It therefore came as no

surprise when the Germans halted Operation Citadel later that day.

The Soviets had suffered huge losses but they were part of the calculated cost of victory. Although the Red Army had lost three times as many men as the Germans, six times as many tanks, and almost three times as many aircraft, the Soviet Union was still victorious at Prokhorovka. Nazi Germany had finally lost the battle in the east. ■

FURTHER READING



● Lloyd Clark: **Kursk – the Greatest Battle**, Headline Review, 2011 ● Mark Healy: **Kursk 1943 – The Tide Turns in the East**, Osprey, 1992 ● Steven H Newton: **Kursk – The German View**, Da Capo Press, 2002 ● Steven J Zaloga: **T-34/76 Medium Tank, 1941-45**, Osprey, 1994 ● Tom Jentz & Hillary Doyle: **Tiger I Heavy Tank, 1942-45**, Osprey, 1993

Inexhaustible Soviet Army prevailed

Although the Soviets lost three times as many men as the Germans at Kursk, the Nazis had to admit they'd been defeated on the Eastern Front.

Stalingrad was the end of the beginning. But the Battle of Kursk was the beginning of the end. Such was Winston Churchill's analysis of the Battle of Kursk. Paradoxically, the German forces managed to kill far more soldiers, and destroy many

more tanks and planes than they lost. For example, the Red Army had to leave 177,847 men and 1,600 tanks on the battlefield, compared to 56,827 men and 252 tanks among the German ranks. But the Red Army had no lack of both men and materiel: its size was its main strength. While factories in the Urals constantly churned out new tanks, the Nazis couldn't afford to lose any more. As the German historian Karl-Heinz Frieser put it: "It was not by tank duels that the Battle of Kursk ... was won, but by the production battle in the factories. The German Reich had lost the production battle long before the first shot was fired at Kursk."

Citadel's Nazi losses

56,827

men lost their lives on the battlefield



252

tanks lay destroyed



500

artillery pieces were destroyed



159

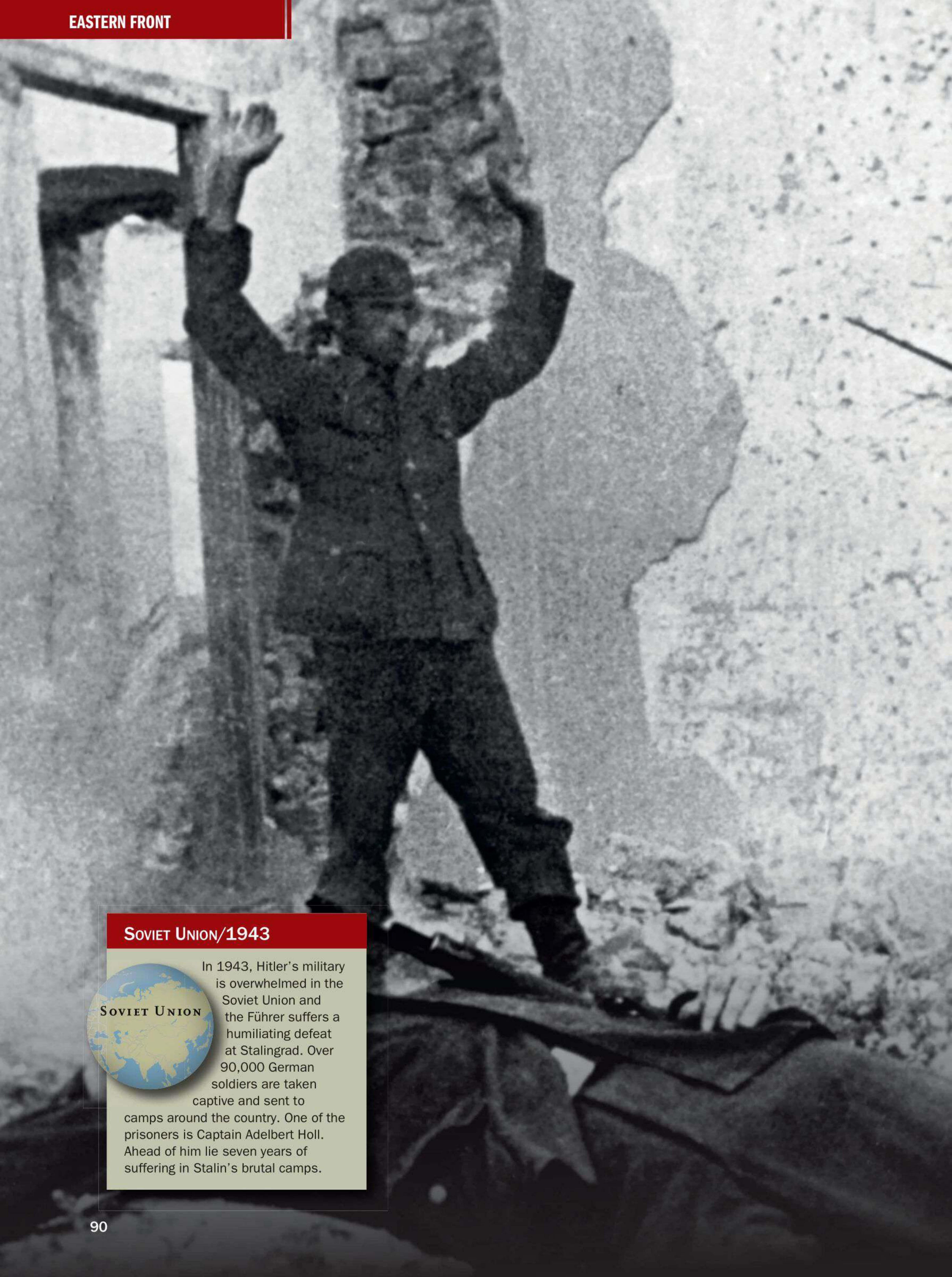
Luftwaffe planes were shot down



The Germans had to face defeat after the Battle of Kursk. From now on, the previously victorious German panzer divisions were on the defensive.

ULLSTEIN BILD

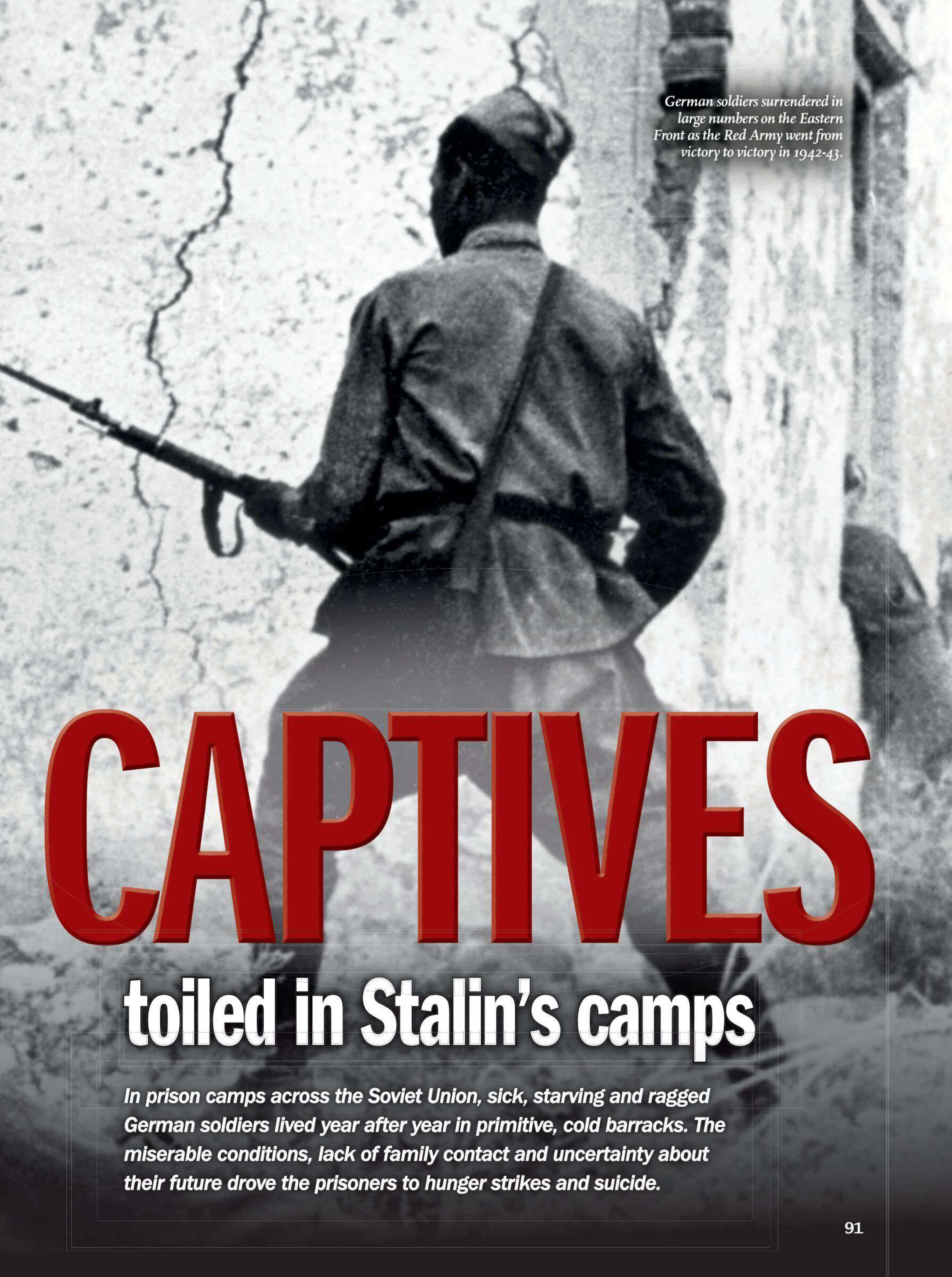




SOVIET UNION/1943



In 1943, Hitler's military is overwhelmed in the Soviet Union and the Führer suffers a humiliating defeat at Stalingrad. Over 90,000 German soldiers are taken captive and sent to camps around the country. One of the prisoners is Captain Adelbert Holl. Ahead of him lie seven years of suffering in Stalin's brutal camps.



German soldiers surrendered in large numbers on the Eastern Front as the Red Army went from victory to victory in 1942-43.

CAPTIVES

toiled in Stalin's camps

In prison camps across the Soviet Union, sick, starving and ragged German soldiers lived year after year in primitive, cold barracks. The miserable conditions, lack of family contact and uncertainty about their future drove the prisoners to hunger strikes and suicide.

“**W**HERE AM I? WHY IS MY HEAD SO HOT, MY THROAT SO DRY? What stinks so much here?” German Captain Adelbert Holl asked himself. The officer looked around him, half awake. Shocked, Holl discovered that seven other prisoners in the room had died, succumbing to disease or starvation. The captain himself was suffering from typhus and malnutrition, and the chances of surviving in the Jelabuga prison camp, 1,000 kilometres east of Moscow, were slim. But Holl was determined not to die.

A month and a half earlier, Soviet troops had captured the 24-year-old officer at Stalingrad. Holl’s unit had been defending the north-western part of the city, but came under heavy attack by Soviet forces on three sides. One day the captain was sitting in his bunker, when a German guard burst in and shouted: “They are coming!”

Moments later, Holl heard a commotion and Soviet voices outside the bunker, before a Red Army soldier with a machine gun was suddenly standing before the captain. The Soviet shouted unintelligible orders, but Holl’s sergeant-major, Josef Pawellek, understood the language and translated: “Lay down your weapons immediately! Abandon all resistance! Fall in outside in front of the dugout!”

Holl was concerned about how wounded Germans would be treated. “They remain here if they cannot move themselves. They will be looked after,” was the Soviet’s answer.

When the captain got up, his sergeant-major passed him two bags of bread. “We could well need them!” Pawellek said.

On his way out, Captain Holl noticed the alarm in the eyes of the wounded soldiers lying on stretchers, who had to stay

behind in the bunker. Outside, the captain lined up with the other captured Germans, who were soon ordered to leave. A soldier stopped Holl, however, and repeated the words “Urr” and “Chleb”. Again, the sergeant-major acted as interpreter:

“Captain, the Ivan wants a watch and will give us bread for it. I have two watches. Shall I give him one?” Holl didn’t care either way, but Pawellek took a watch from his jacket pocket. The Soviet immediately strapped it to his wrist without giving any bread in return, and simply pointed in the direction the Germans should march. In front of the Nazi soldiers lay a long trek towards prison camps, through an unforgiving, empty, snow-covered landscape, in sub-zero temperatures.

PRISONERS BEGAN DEATH MARCH

For weeks, Adelbert Holl and his comrades trudged along in sprawling columns. Exhausted prisoners who lagged behind were beaten with the guards’ rifle butts. And any German soldiers trying to escape were shot.

Holl often walked at the end of the column and tried to help some of the weakest prisoners. But gradually more and more Germans were left lifeless at the side of the road.

Holl didn’t avoid getting sick himself. By the time the column of prisoners reached Jelabuga Camp – a fortification surrounded by a four-metre-high wall, barbed-wire fences and watchtowers – the captain had a fever. On arrival, the guards confiscated the prisoners’ few valuables. The Soviets also shaved off the soldiers’ head and body hair, and smeared the men with strong-smelling ointment to keep lice away.

Eventually, the Germans had a bath, and their clothes were deloused – Holl and his comrades were transformed from



Captured German soldiers marched in kilometre-long columns for days towards Stalin’s POW camps.

Nazi soldiers into prisoners of war in the Soviet Union's vast prison camp system.

MEN ARRIVED AT SQUALID CAMPS

During the war and until the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union had over 500 of what were known as GUPVI camps, housing more than four million prisoners of war. According to Soviet sources, 2,571,600 of the POWs were German military personnel. The majority spent more than six years in the camps, and 450,600 lost their lives there. However, according to German historian Rüdiger Overmans, the death toll was closer to 1.1 million.

The camps were characterised by degrading work, poor food and high mortality rates. Many detainees died of typhus and malnutrition, while guards often beat prisoners to death. If anyone tried to escape, they were shot dead. The miserable conditions, with no prospect of freedom, also drove inmates to drown themselves in cesspools or run towards the camps' barbed-wire fences to be shot.

Some German prisoners of war were fortunate and ended up in camps like Tkibuli at the foot of the mountains of the Caucasus, where the climate was relatively mild. Others, like Adelbert Holl, were unlucky enough to live and work in the biting cold of the central Soviet Union. Some camps were built of wood or stone, and furnished with tightly packed three-storey bunk beds. But in many places, the prisoners simply lived in tents or poorly constructed huts that offered



Prisoners of war slept close together in cold, insanitary barracks, where diseases easily spread.

The Soviets put German POWs to work chopping down trees, quarrying stone or cultivating land.



scant shelter from the cold Soviet winter. The unsanitary conditions, poor diet and disease soon took their toll on Adelbert Holl and his fellow prisoners.

SOVIETS TRIED TO CONVERT PRISONERS

As the weeks went by, Adelbert Holl became more and more emaciated, his limbs becoming as thin as a child's. All around the officer, his fellow soldiers died of fever and typhus, and only about 800 of the original 2,000 or so prisoners were ►



Stalin set up over 500 camps

When German soldiers surrendered to the Red Army, years in one of the Soviet Union's 500-odd prison camps, scattered from the Baltic in the west to Siberia in the east, awaited them. The prisoners toiled at everything from logging to rebuilding industries.

Soldiers cut down trees

On **Siberia's forested steppes**, prisoners were put to work felling and hauling trees. The Soviets also forced the Germans to quarry stones or work in coal mines.

Prisoners restored train workshop

The number of camps was highest in the **most industrialised part of the Soviet Union**. Among other things, German captives rebuilt the country's largest train workshop in three years.

Germans were harnessed to plough

In the **Jelabuga** area, German prisoners worked in agricultural production. The former soldiers had to work the land and, in several cases, had to pull the plough themselves instead of horses or oxen.

- 1-9 camps
- 10-19 camps
- 20-30 camps
- 50+ camps

0 500 1,000 1,500 2,000 2,500 km



The prisoners fetched soup in buckets from primitive kitchens, but the food contained little nourishment.

The prisoners' daily food ration consisted mainly of a few hundred grams of bread.



still alive after a few months. Holl, however, survived his typhus infection.

Every morning, the prisoners had to stand upright in the courtyard and be counted. The dormitories and inmates themselves were frequently searched, too. If the guards found anything of value, it was confiscated. Detainees who didn't follow the rules were punished with beatings or solitary confinement in a cell a few square metres in size.

The prisoners were also subjected to hours of repeated interrogation if the Soviets suspected them of planning an escape or speaking disparagingly about the Communist regime. The interrogator tried to extract the truth by offering cake or by beating the prisoners. Another approach was to put the Germans in a boiling hot room wearing all their clothes, or to send naked prisoners outside in the freezing cold.

Holl was questioned, too, and the Soviets tried to convert the officer from Nazism to socialism. The camp staff generally made a huge effort to convert the prisoners to Soviet state ideology by showing propaganda films, handing out socialist newspapers, and forcing the inmates to listen to political speeches.

In 1943, German army officers set up two organisations in the camps: the *Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland* (NKFD) and the *Bund Deutscher Offiziere* (BDO). These groups disseminated anti-Nazi and pro-Soviet propaganda among German soldiers in the camps and at the front via newspapers, radio broadcasts and leaflets.

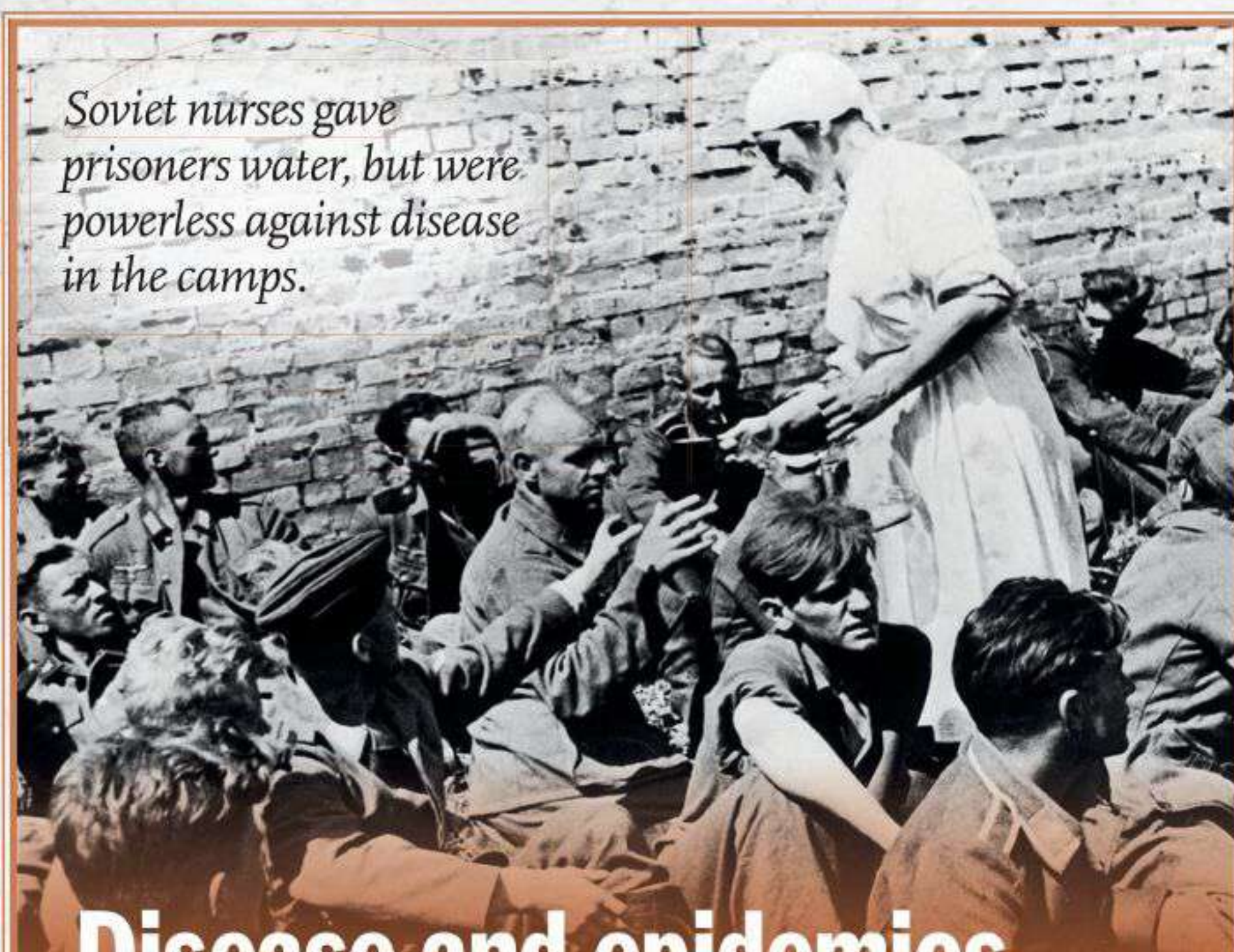
The NKFD and the BDO recruited prisoners of war in large numbers, and membership grew as Germany's final defeat drew closer. Many prisoners found it difficult to resist and were rewarded with privileges – larger food rations, for example – for joining the organisations.

Holl, however, saw the conversions as treason, and opposed the Soviet campaigning. Instead, the captain found a community of like-minded prisoners. The groups loathed each other, and the hatred created great distrust in the camps. Indeed, informers quickly passed on opinions and statements to the camp leadership.

Holl was accused of anti-Soviet propaganda in the summer of 1943, but after a month in a ▶

The POWs' thin uniforms didn't protect them from the Soviet Union's harsh winters.

Soviet nurses gave prisoners water, but were powerless against disease in the camps.



Disease and epidemics ravaged the prisoners

Up to a million German soldiers lost their lives in Soviet prison camps. Disease and epidemics in particular thinned out prisoner numbers.

Lack of food and malnutrition made German prisoners of war extremely susceptible to disease. In particular, typhus, transmitted by disease-carrying lice, spread rapidly in the camps, killing thousands of inmates.

Pneumonia, malaria, measles and smallpox were also rampant in the barracks, and many Germans died of dysentery or suffered from dehydration and diarrhoea. The Soviets tried to contain the epidemics by isolating the sick in special camp areas, but in practice could do little about the spread of disease.

cell, repeated interrogations and reduced food rations, the Soviets realised that the German was unbreakable. Instead, in September 1943, the prisoner was transferred to Kama Camp in the same town.

PRISONERS SUPPORTED EACH OTHER

Conditions in Kama were even worse. Six-metre-high walls and a barbed-wire fence surrounded the compound, and the inmates got only one hour of fresh air a day during a morning walk. Moreover, the camp staff distributed so little firewood that the prisoners couldn't keep warm. The inmates had to cut extra wood from the barracks to heat the cold rooms.

Adelbert Holl passed the time by writing poetry and learning Russian and English. He also discussed German literature with other prisoners and played chess and dice. But the officer found it hard to maintain his optimism as news of German defeats became increasingly discouraging. The prisoners' camaraderie, however, helped to keep spirits high. When an inmate had a birthday, his comrades would give part of their bread ration to the birthday boy. The Germans also united in trying to put pressure on the camp staff, often using hunger strikes. For example, in the spring of 1944, 32 prisoners in Kama Camp went on hunger strike in response to the fact that the prison guards had covered the barrack windows. The strike resulted in the windows being only

partially covered. The Soviets tried to weaken the group of prisoners by moving Holl, who had participated in several of the strikes, back to the original camp. And the Soviets put the officer to work – a heavy burden that the German, unlike many fellow prisoners, had hitherto been spared.

SOLDIERS TO REBUILD STALIN'S EMPIRE

During the war years, hard labour had already been part of camp life for German prisoners, and Nazi Germany's final surrender on 9th May 1945 didn't change the situation. On the contrary, the Soviets increased the Germans' workload. All Germans, regardless of rank, had to help rebuild the Soviet Union after the destruction of the war, and had to work in factories, forestry or coal mines.

Prisoners with technical skills were in high demand and could advance from mechanic to foreman. Some work crews grew to 100 men, ranging from crane operators and mechanics to welders, masons and scaffolders, who constructed hospitals and buildings for the security service.

Holl's first job, however, was simple. The captain had to keep the yard in front of the prison barracks clean and collect straw. Shortly after the end of the war, though, he was sent back to Kama Camp, from where the prisoners marched out in large columns every day to worksites west of the city. Holl's job was to plough 100 square metres of Russian steppe every day. The area would end up 20 square kilometres in size, and be sown with potatoes. Fourteen prisoners at a time were harnessed to a plough in the place of animals, and the working day could easily last more than ten hours.

However, the captain soon replaced farm work with forest work when the Soviets sent him to Xiltau Woodland Camp. The primitive camp was filled to capacity with prisoners and consisted of a hut, some tents, a field kitchen and latrines.

Few inmates had tin cups and spoons. When the Soviets distributed lunch – a slice of bread with ham, 40 grams of sugar, and a portion of pea or barley soup – many prisoners had to borrow others' eating utensils or just use their fingers.

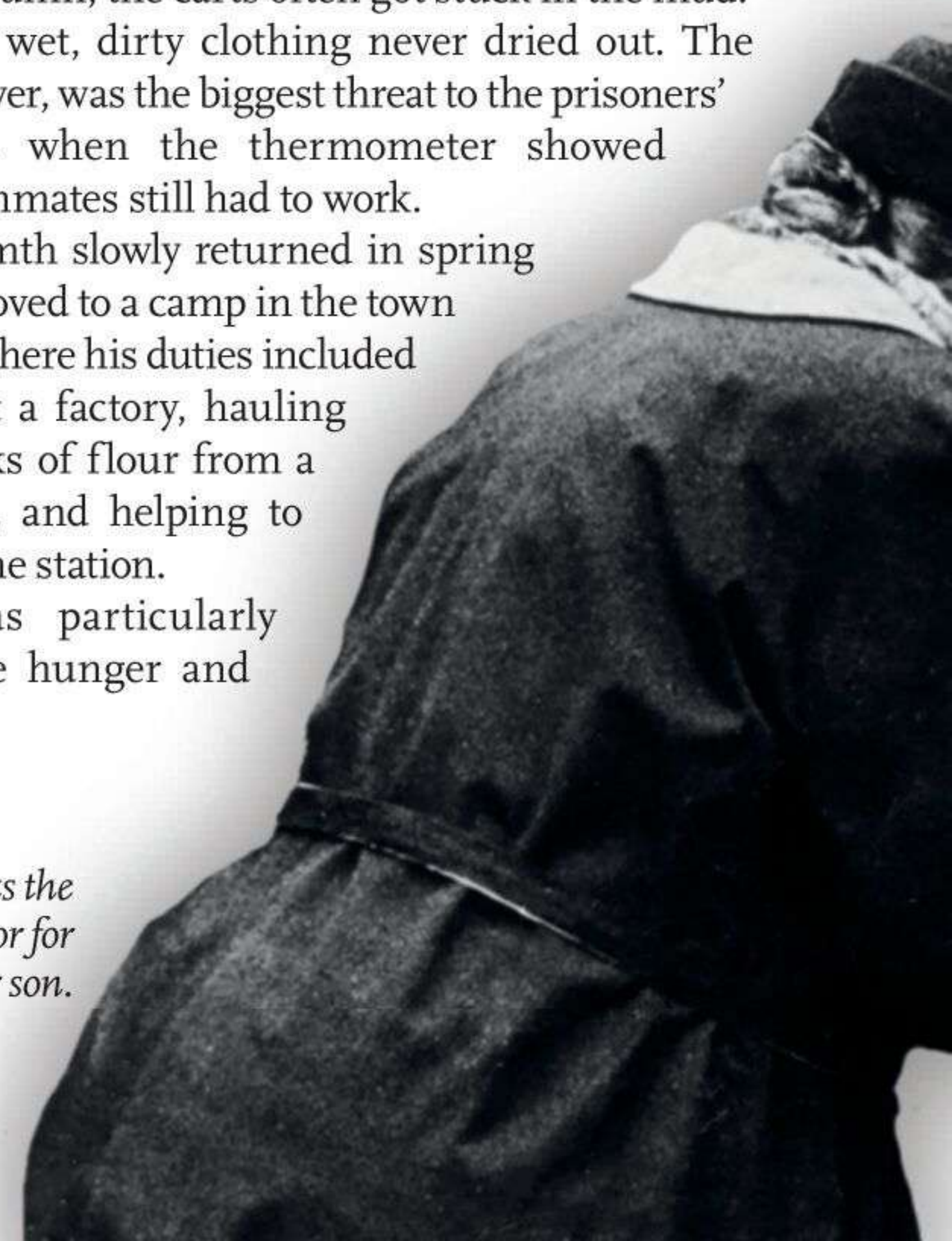
As soon as the last mouthful was swallowed, the logging continued. One team of workers felled the trees, and another hauled the trunks away on carts. The journey was 10-12 km, and in the wet autumn, the carts often got stuck in the mud.

The prisoners' wet, dirty clothing never dried out. The winter cold, however, was the biggest threat to the prisoners' survival – even when the thermometer showed -30° Celsius, the inmates still had to work.

When the warmth slowly returned in spring 1946, Holl was moved to a camp in the town of Seloni-Dolsk, where his duties included sawing timber at a factory, hauling 60-kilogram sacks of flour from a mill to a bakery, and helping to unload trains at the station.

The work was particularly difficult, because hunger and

A mother thanks the German chancellor for releasing her son.



malnutrition – as in the earlier camps – plagued Holl and his fellow prisoners.

RED CROSS PARCELS DISAPPEARED

If the Germans failed to meet their work quota, the Soviets cut the daily bread ration from 500-600 grams to 400 grams. As well as bread, the meals consisted of three portions of cabbage soup, which usually contained no meat other than some foul-smelling fish.

Although the Red Cross sent aid packages to the camps, with the instruction “Only for prisoners of war in the Soviet Union”, Holl never saw the parcels, which ended up in Soviet markets.

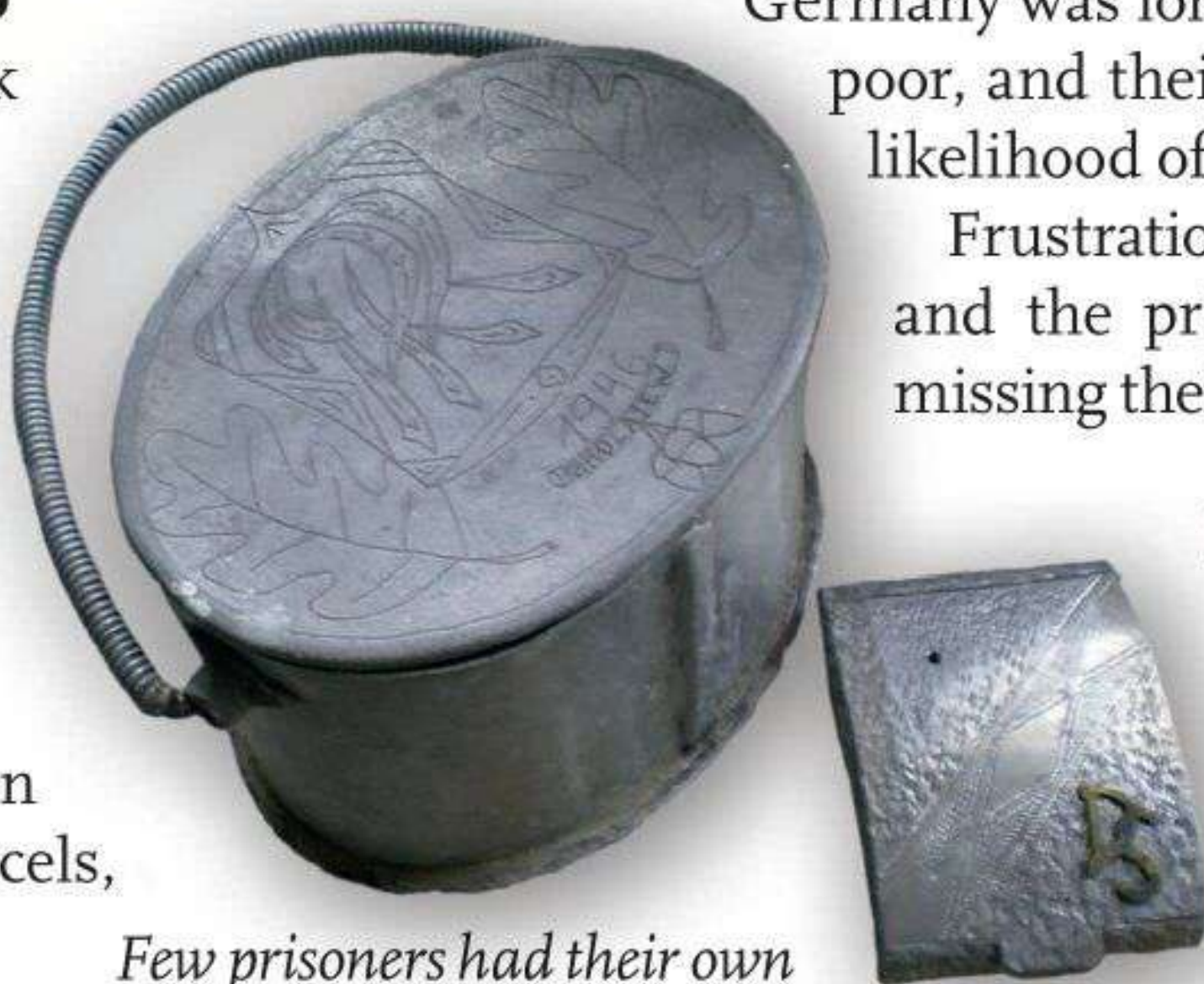
Prisoners working in agriculture might have been lucky enough to steal a few potatoes or a sack of flour when the guards were inattentive. The potatoes were eaten raw and the flour could be sold or exchanged for bread. The inmates also gathered mushrooms, weeds and grass to thicken the watery soup.

The prisoners received wages, too, which could be used to buy extra food, but they were paltry. Some working groups pooled their food and money and divided everything – more or less equally – among themselves. The Germans also bartered goods and struck deals to acquire extra bread or tobacco. No

prisoner was allowed to possess over 150 roubles – the Soviets considered anything more as evidence of planning an escape.

However, prison escapes were unlikely. The road to Germany was long, the prisoners’ physical condition poor, and their Russian language skills bad. The likelihood of being discovered was high.

Frustration in the camp grew daily, however, and the prisoners had to learn to cope with missing their families in order not to go to pieces.



Few prisoners had their own kitchen utensils and had to borrow tin cans, spoons and cups, or eat with their fingers.

HOLL PROMISED RELEASE

Adelbert Holl gradually became more and more bitter. But he tried to rein in his thoughts and avoid dreaming of freedom, lest he go mad. It was not until January 1946 that the captain and fellow

prisoners were allowed to send a letter home and let family members know they were still alive. Six months later, Holl received a reply

and photos from his wife. Meanwhile, the German officer continued his endless journey from one inhumane labour camp to another. But in the spring of 1947, things seemed to be looking up for the former captain. At a labour camp in Zaporizhia, Ukraine, the captain was told that all German prisoners of war would be sent home by the end of 1948. After years of Soviet lies and propaganda, however, the officer doubted the information – and rightly so. In the camp ►



NAME

TITLE

KONRAD ADENAUER

FEDERAL CHANCELLOR

Chancellor brought prisoners home

By the end of 1950, nearly 30,000 German prisoners of war remained in Soviet prison camps. The Soviets considered the prisoners to be war criminals and regarded their work as a form of war reparation. However, West Germany’s first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, worked hard to have the POWs released and repatriated. But it was only after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 that the German government was able to begin negotiations to bring the soldiers home, and in 1955 the chancellor travelled to Moscow to meet with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. The visit led to West Germany opening diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and the repatriation of the last 15,000 German prisoners.

Konrad Adenauer served as chancellor until 1963, the longest-reigning chancellor since Otto von Bismarck.

- Studied in Freiburg, Munich and Bonn.
- Imprisoned by the Nazis in 1934 and 1944.

1876-1967



When German POWs were released, they began a long journey back to Germany by train. If the prisoners had been interned in eastern Siberia, the return journey stretched over many thousands of kilometres, and on the way the Germans had to stop off in transit camps.

newspaper, detainees could follow the low number of prisoners being repatriated, and pessimism spread. By the end of 1948, almost half a million German prisoners of war were still in the Soviet Union. And the disappointment of not being sent home prompted Holl to quit his job – a decision he paid for.

CAPTAIN CONVICTED OF SABOTAGE

The walkout led to Holl being charged with sabotage. The Soviets held a trial in the local courthouse and the sentence

was eight years' hard labour. Holl was sent by train to the wooded plains of Siberia, where he lived and worked in penal camps among criminals. Around 20,000 fellow German officers were sentenced to years in prison for more or less fabricated acts that the Communist regime saw as sabotage.

The German officer toiled for almost a year, digging boreholes, hauling logs and quarrying stones to be used for such projects as building a new railway. Food rations were as poor as in previous camps, and Holl's knee began to swell from vitamin deficiency. Eventually, he was unable to walk.

But on 17th February 1950, without warning, the starving captain received the news he had been awaiting for seven years: "You can saw up the tree trunk lying outside. You know the lengths. By the way, you are going home tomorrow."

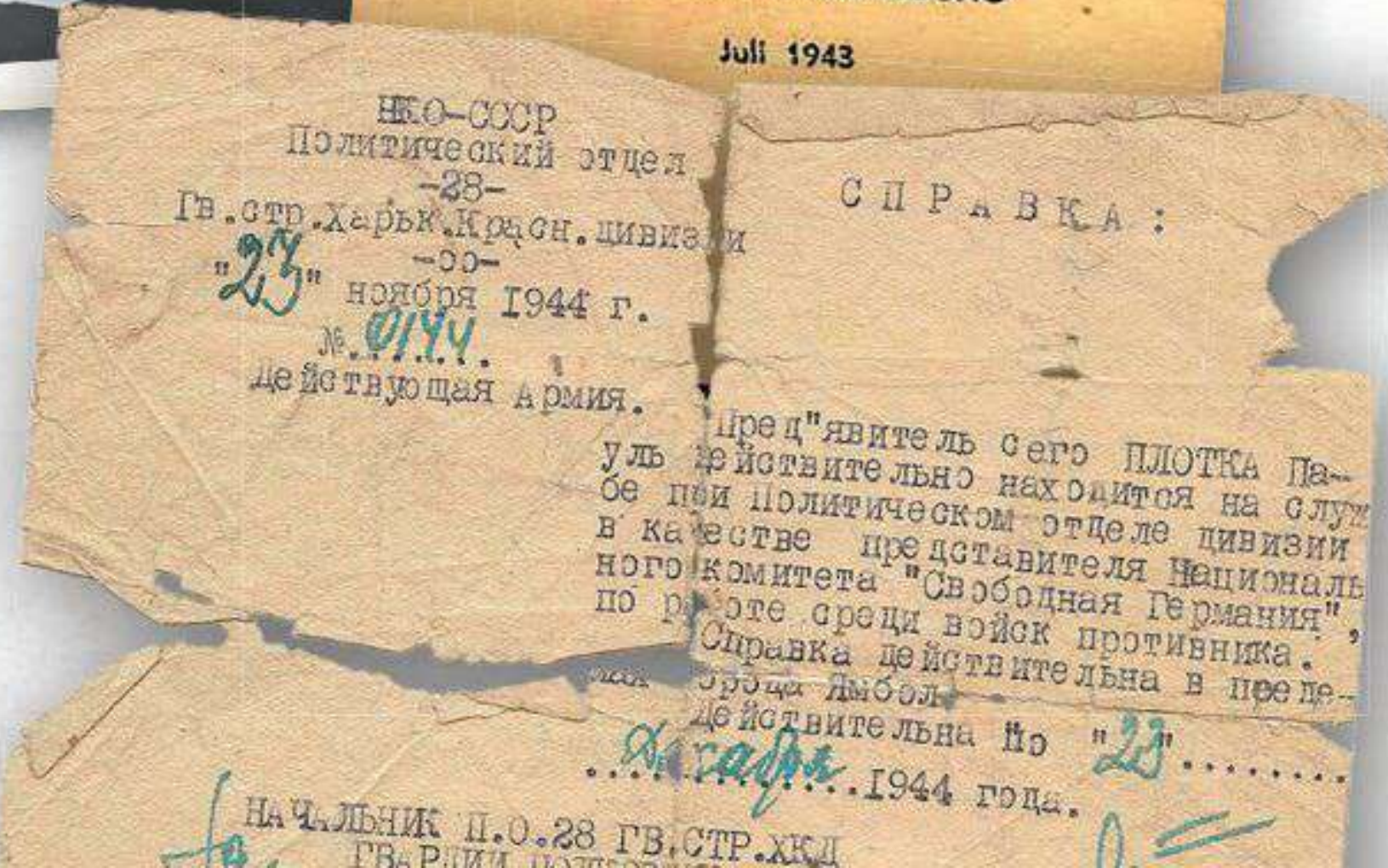
With 18 other German soldiers, the officer began the long journey home. On the way, Holl stopped at transit camps, where more and more freed Germans joined them, until 913 POWs travelled west to their final destination. In April 1950, the captain returned to Germany a free man.

Nearly 30,000 German prisoners of war remained in the camps at the end of the year. After Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer began negotiations with the Soviet regime for the release of the remaining prisoners, and in 1956, the Soviet Union released the last German detainees.

Of the more than 90,000 soldiers who, like Adelbert Holl, were captured at Stalingrad, only about 6,000 returned home. The rest had perished from hunger, cold, disease and hard labour.



Prisoners of war in the Soviet Union founded the anti-Nazi organisation NKFD.

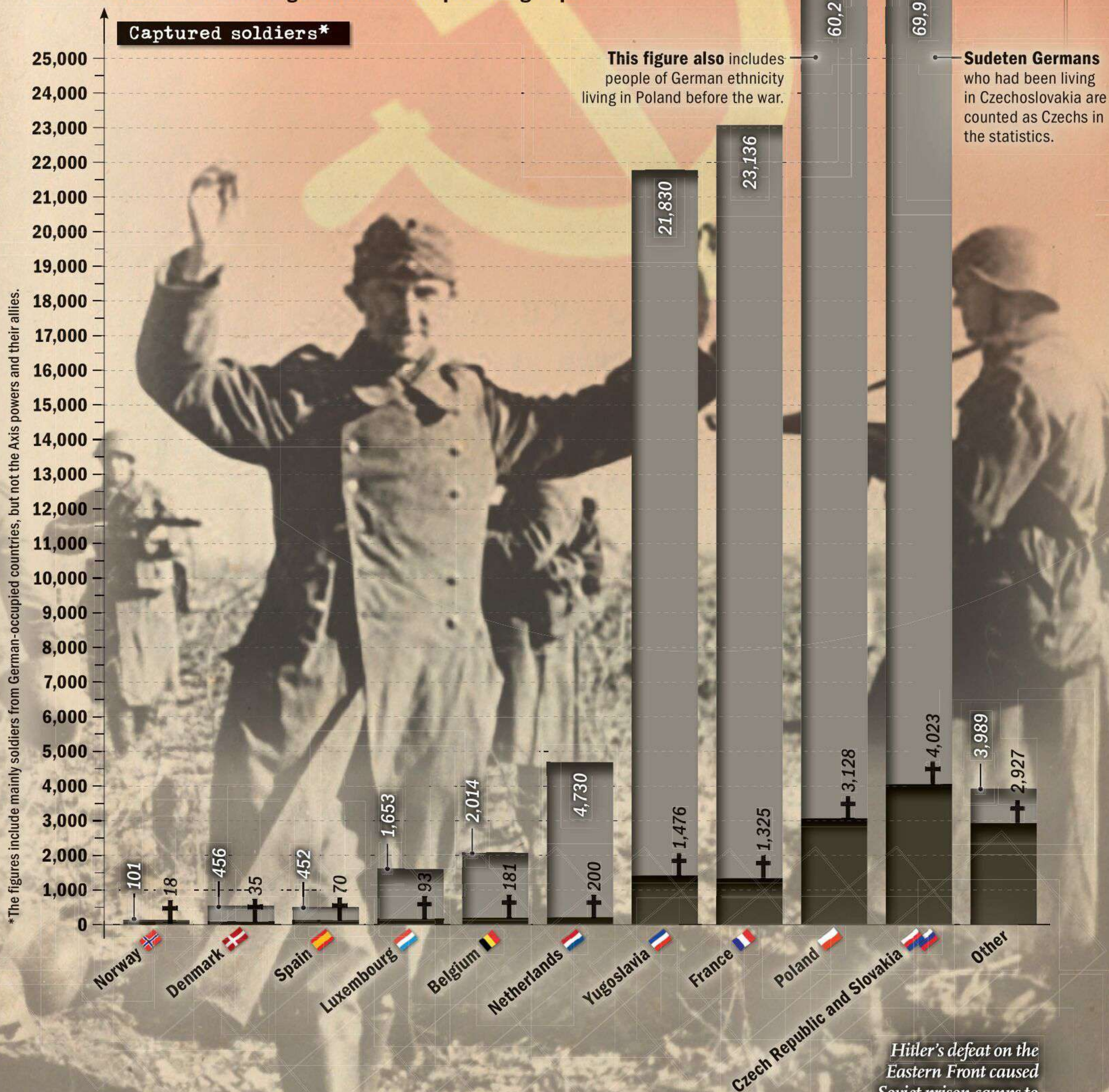


The NKFD printed a manifesto and membership cards.

Young volunteers sent to camps

Over 2.5 million German soldiers ended up in Stalin's camps, where up to a third perished. They were joined by young men from all over Europe who volunteered for the crusade against Bolshevism and followed the 'master race' into captivity.

Poles and Czechs were the largest non-German prisoner groups



CAPITULATION After capturing the city of Vitebsk on 27th June, the Soviets interrogate captured German officers.

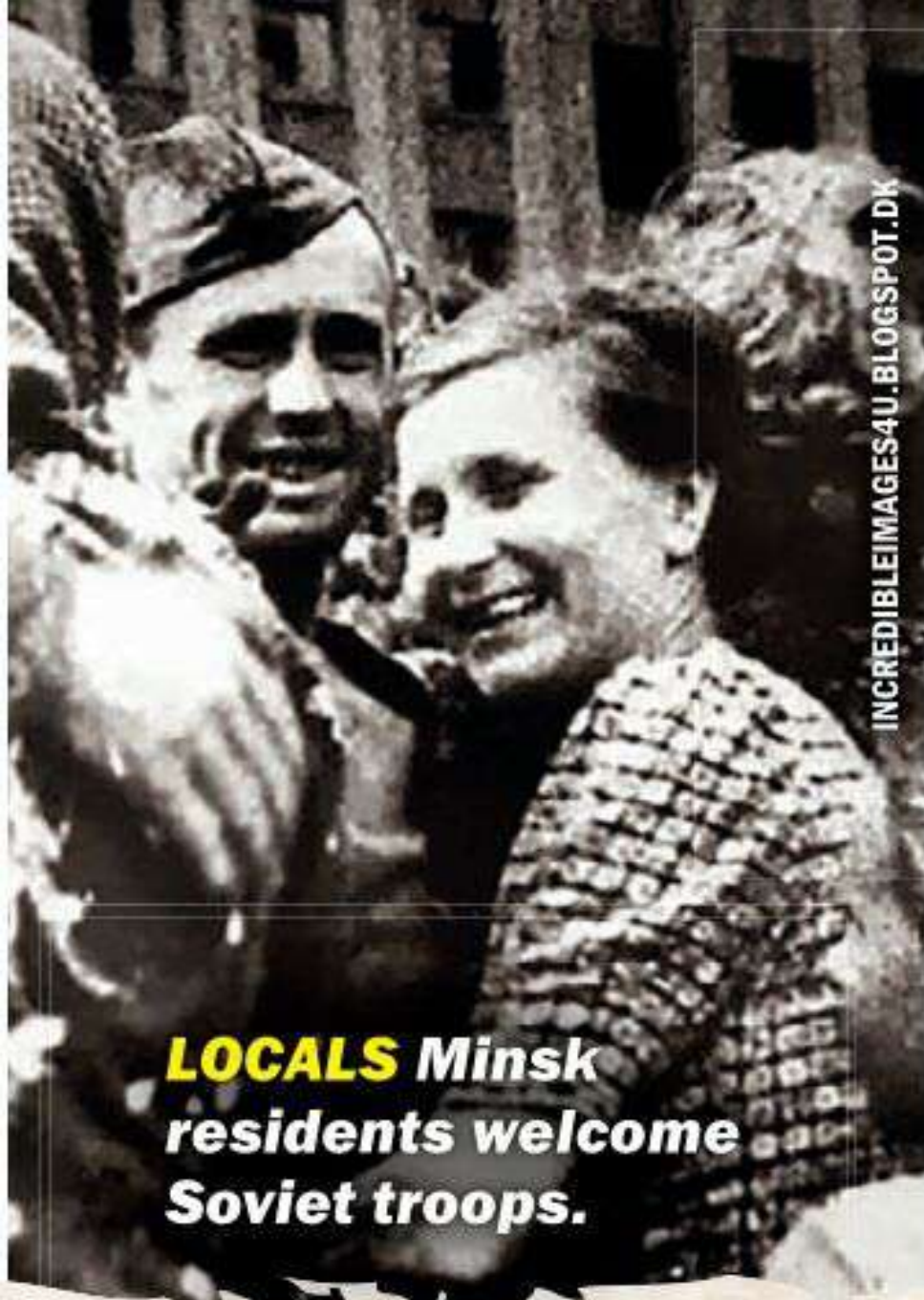
JUBILATION Soviet troops liberate the Belarusian capital, Minsk, on 3rd July.

Operation Bagration

Stalin's

The Nazi leadership suspected that the next major attack would take place in Ukraine, so sent in their best tank divisions during the summer of 1944. Stalin was pleased – his diversionary tactic had worked, and he was able to assemble 1.6 million soldiers completely unnoticed, ready for a crushing attack on Belarus. Before the Germans realised their mistake, the blow had been struck.

For three years, Joseph Stalin had been waiting to pay Hitler back for the invasion of the Soviet Union.



LOCALS Minsk residents welcome Soviet troops.

INCREDIBLEIMAGES4U.BLOGSPOT.DK

ADVANCE The offensive continues. On 13th July, the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, falls.



GETTY IMAGES



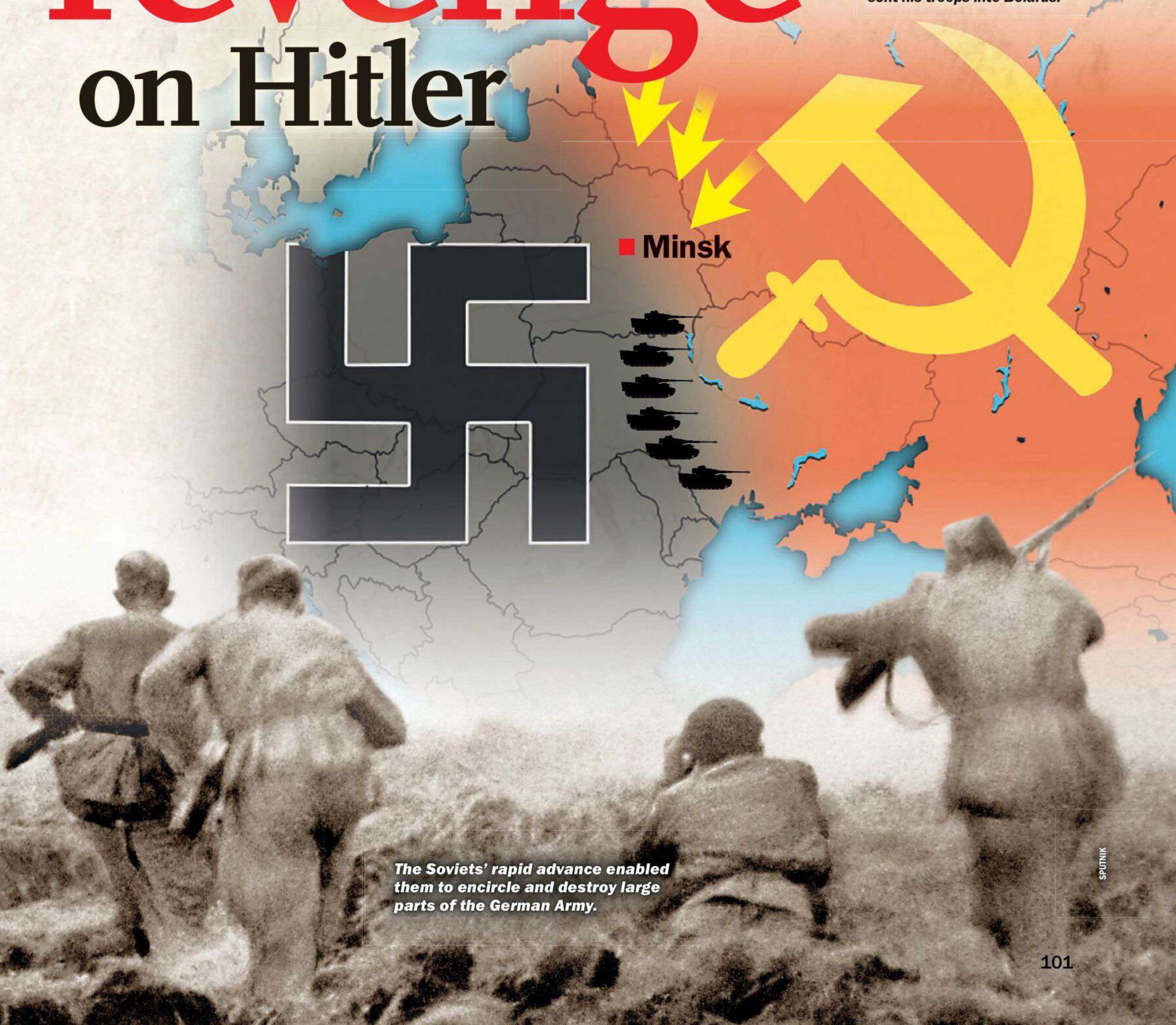
COOPERATION In the summer of 1944, Polish soldiers help the Red Army.

POLISH NATIONAL ARCHIVE

revenge on Hitler

DIVERSIONARY TACTICS

The Germans believed that the Soviet offensive would be directed at Ukraine. But Stalin sent his troops into Belarus.



■ Minsk

The Soviets' rapid advance enabled them to encircle and destroy large parts of the German Army.

SPUTNIK



Hitler was obsessed with capturing Stalingrad. The episode cost 180,000 Germans their lives.

RITZAU

BY ELSE CHRISTENSEN & ANDREAS ABILDGAARD

The sound of exploding shells shattered the stillness of the night, and the ground shook. To Armin Scheiderbauer, it felt like an earthquake.

The 20-year-old adjutant in the German 472nd Grenadier Regiment had calmed his nerves the night before with copious amounts of schnapps. Dazed, he awoke to the sound of the enemy attack. Scheiderbauer pressed himself into the trench that he and his comrades manned outside the city of Vitebsk in Belarus. The date was 22nd June 1944, and the time was 03.05.

The timing was not random. Three years earlier, almost to the minute, Operation Barbarossa, Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, had begun. Now the hour of retribution had arrived.

The blasts, which thundered painfully through Scheiderbauer's aching head, were the start of a carefully planned major Soviet offensive. The goal was to crush German forces in Belarus in order to pave the way to Berlin and final victory.

In the summer of 1944, the Red Army was in a favourable position to begin the operation. The Germans, who had gone from victory to victory in the first year of the invasion, had felt the fortunes of war turning ever since the winter of 1942-1943. The Wehrmacht suffered defeat at Stalingrad, where thousands of soldiers succumbed to the relentless Soviet cold.

After this, the Germans were forced to retreat. Army Group North had to give up its siege of Leningrad, which was liberated on 27th January 1944, and in Crimea, the German forces – gathered

Führer's blunders cost Germany dearly

A German victory seemed certain when the Wehrmacht's troops marched across the border into the Soviet Union on 22nd June 1941. No one had yet been able to stop Hitler's armies, but the Nazis' luck ran out when, in the late summer of 1942, they reached the city of Stalingrad on the Volga River.

Here the Red Army surrounded the German 6th Army, led by Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus. The besieged Germans starved and froze in the severe winter until they were forced to surrender in February 1943. Paulus's men had run out of ammunition. The

fighting cost the Germans 180,000 men and became a turning point in World War II. Thereafter, the Nazis were almost constantly in retreat.

An attempt to reverse their fortunes was made in summer 1943, when German troops tried to surround the Red Army near the city of Kursk, about 450 km south of Moscow. However, heavily fortified Soviet lines of defence, as well as fierce resistance from T-34 tanks, stopped the German attack.

With Operation Bagration, Stalin wanted to crush German forces on the Eastern Front once and for all.

The goal was to crush the German forces in Belarus.

in Army Group South – had also been compelled to withdraw.

There was just one army group that the Soviet forces hadn't yet managed to send packing: Army Group Centre in Belarus, with approximately 600,000 soldiers under the command of Field

Marshal Ernst Busch.

Barely three years earlier, Stalin had evacuated large parts of his government from Moscow as the Germans approached. He therefore named the 1944 offensive Operation Bagration, after Pyotr Bagration, a general who, in 1812, had defended Moscow to the last drop of blood against Napoleon's invading army.

Deceptions tricked Germans

Operation Bagration was part of a large-scale offensive planned by the Allied leaders Joseph Stalin, US President

Franklin D Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in Tehran the year before.

The Western Allies wanted to land troops in Normandy (D-Day) in a campaign called Overlord and force the Germans to retreat. Meanwhile, Stalin was to push the Germans west. The location of his operation, however, was confidential; not even Stalin's closest allies were privy to the knowledge.

Through his intelligence service, Stalin knew that the Germans were aware that something was up. The Nazis, however, had no idea that Army Group Centre in Belarus was the target. On the contrary, the German leadership was convinced that Soviet forces would strike in Ukraine, where the Red Army had made major inroads earlier that year.

Soviet General Headquarters, Stavka, ensured that the Germans didn't learn of their error. In May 1944, the Red Army carried out a series of inventive

manoeuvres aimed at tricking the Germans. False radio information about troop movements and mock forces were used to strengthen the Germans' mistaken belief that Ukraine would be the main target of the impending attack.

The Soviets spent most of their time in the city of Chisinau (in present-day Moldova). Here the Red Army apparently gathered a rifle division, two artillery divisions and a tank corps. In reality, models comprised a significant part of the tank force, and each division consisted of only about 100 men, who, among other things, set up fake field kitchens. To further deceive the Nazis, the Soviet Air Forces repeatedly flew over the area – apparently in an attempt to keep the Luftwaffe away. From time to time, however, the Soviet planes let the Germans through on purpose. The hope was that the German pilots would notice the apparent concentration of troops.

Meanwhile, the Soviets sent troops by train and truck to Belarus from southern Ukraine, Crimea and the Baltics. As they got nearer the front, the journeys took place in the dark – during the night, up to 50,000 trucks drove along the Belarusian country roads. White markers helped the drivers to navigate. Those who didn't reach their destination before dawn had strict orders to pull off the road, camouflage their vehicle, and stay where they were until nightfall.

Leadership ignored warnings

The deception worked. Under cover of darkness, the Red Army carried out the war's biggest accumulation of materiel in Belarus. Up to 5,800 tanks, 7,800 fighters and 33,000 guns and mortars were amassed in secret. In the first three weeks of June alone, as many as 75,000 train trucks bearing soldiers, weapons, ammunition and supplies rolled into the area behind the front line.

The Germans' ignorance was partly down to practical reasons: the Luftwaffe lacked aircraft for reconnaissance after three years of war on the Eastern Front, and many of the planes that could still fly were diverted to Ukraine in anticipation of the attack. Nor could information from Soviet prisoners of war or observations ►

A well-prepared bluff

The element of surprise is crucial for success in war, the Soviets believed. The Germans didn't know where the next attack would be.

Deception and surprise have always played a role in war. In the Soviet Union, however, strategists elevated the military bluff, *maskirovka*, to an independent doctrine. The concept encompasses all forms of deception of the enemy – from the use of smokescreens on the battlefield to erecting fake tanks and installations.

The Soviets developed *maskirovka* in the 1920s, and during Operation Bagration, the strategy was perfected. Historians believe that the deception deserves much of the credit for the successful operation. For example, the Soviets hid troops east of Minsk, while

deliberately allowing the Germans to observe fake military units in Ukraine. The Soviets also broadcast radio communications about non-existent troop movements, which the Germans listened in on.

In practice, the Soviets' *maskirovka* consisted of three elements, but everything from the strategists' planning of army transports to the soldiers' daily chores was done with the purpose of cheating the Germans.

1 MISLEAD ABOUT INTENTION

STRATEGIC: At a general level, the *maskirovka* strategy was about hiding the target of attack from the enemy. For instance, Soviet General Headquarters, Stavka, led Hitler to believe, via radio messages, that the Red Army would strike in Ukraine.

2 EXPLOIT DARKNESS

OPERATIONAL: In practice, it was necessary to hide troop movements. In all, the Red Army moved seven armies, 11 air corps and thousands of tanks and artillery units – without the Germans' knowledge. The methods were simple: most soldiers were moved at night on trains that stopped 50-100 km away from the front line, so the Germans didn't spot them. The soldiers arrived at the front in small groups shortly before the battle began.

3 CAMOUFLAGE POSITIONS

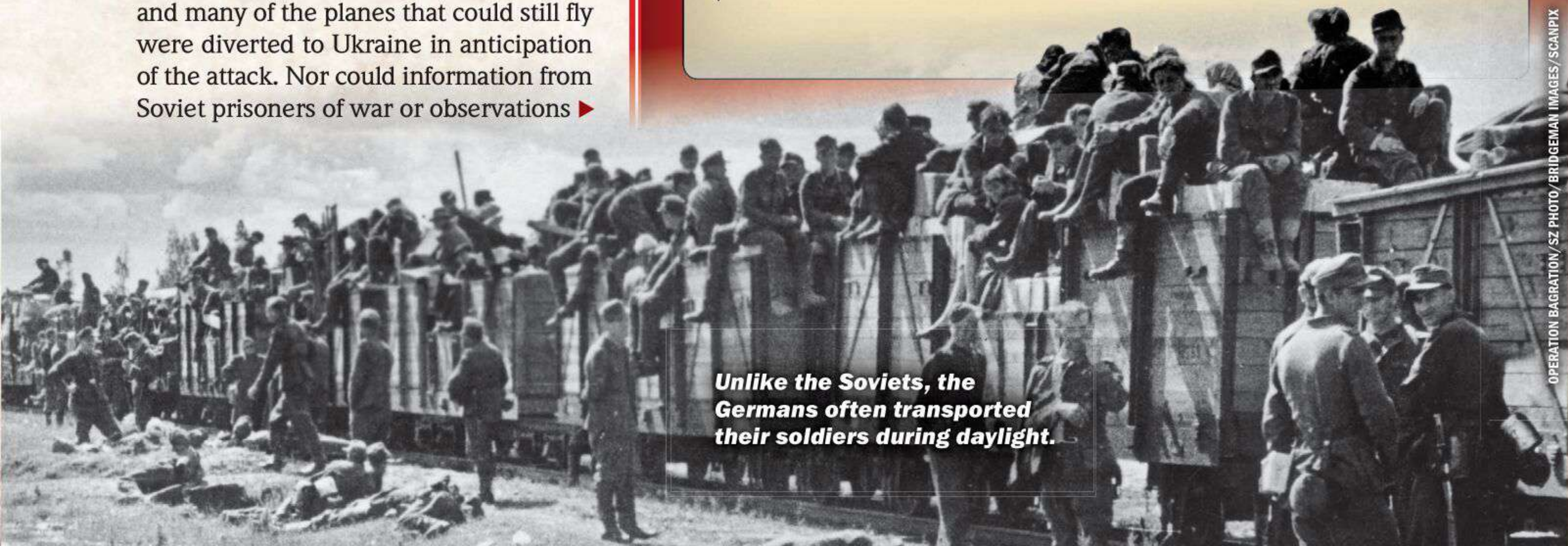
TACTICAL: When they arrived, the individual Soviet units had to hide. The soldiers carefully camouflaged their positions and avoided moving around the terrain in daylight as much as possible. Even bathing took place in secret after dark.



Soldiers were trained to camouflage themselves as bushes, for example.



Hay and straw could be used to hide tanks.



Unlike the Soviets, the Germans often transported their soldiers during daylight.

OPERATION BAGRATION / SZ PHOTO / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES / SCANPIX

Germans were completely crushed

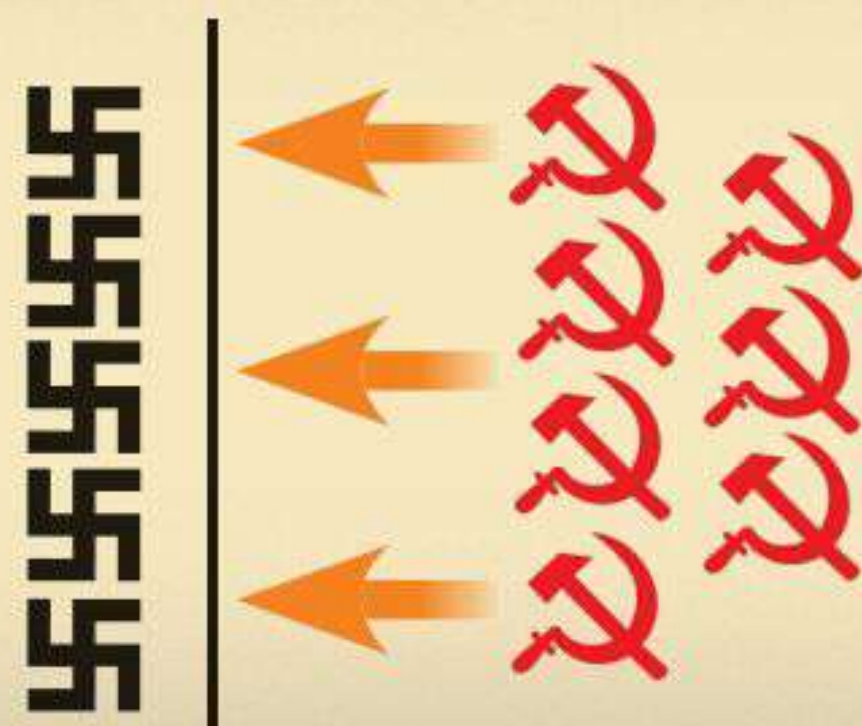
The Soviets went to great lengths to defeat their enemy. Learning from their defeats in previous wars, Soviet General Headquarters (Stavka) adopted a new technique during World War II. While the Soviets had previously been content to simply see the enemy off, the opponent now had to be crushed so emphatically to rule

out the possibility of reorganisation and counter-attacks.

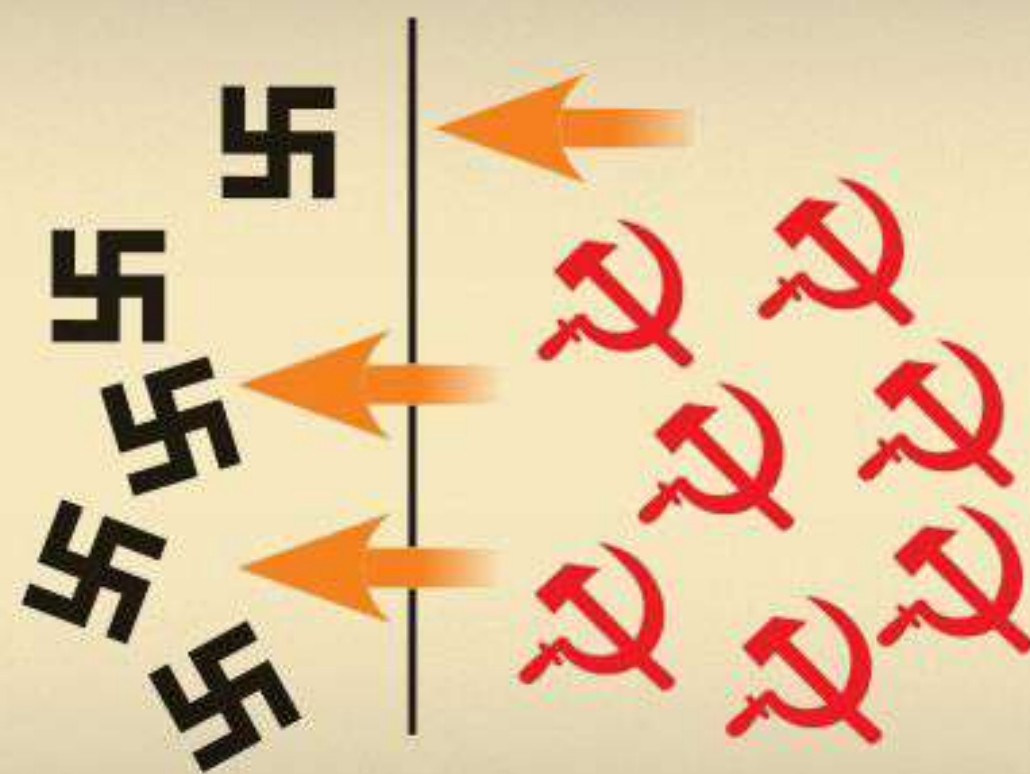
The technique, called deep operation, was devised by General Vladimir Triandafillov as early as the 1920s, and developed further by the Red Army in the 1930s. The strategy was crucial to the Soviets' enormous success during Operation Bagration.

Red Army's deep operation

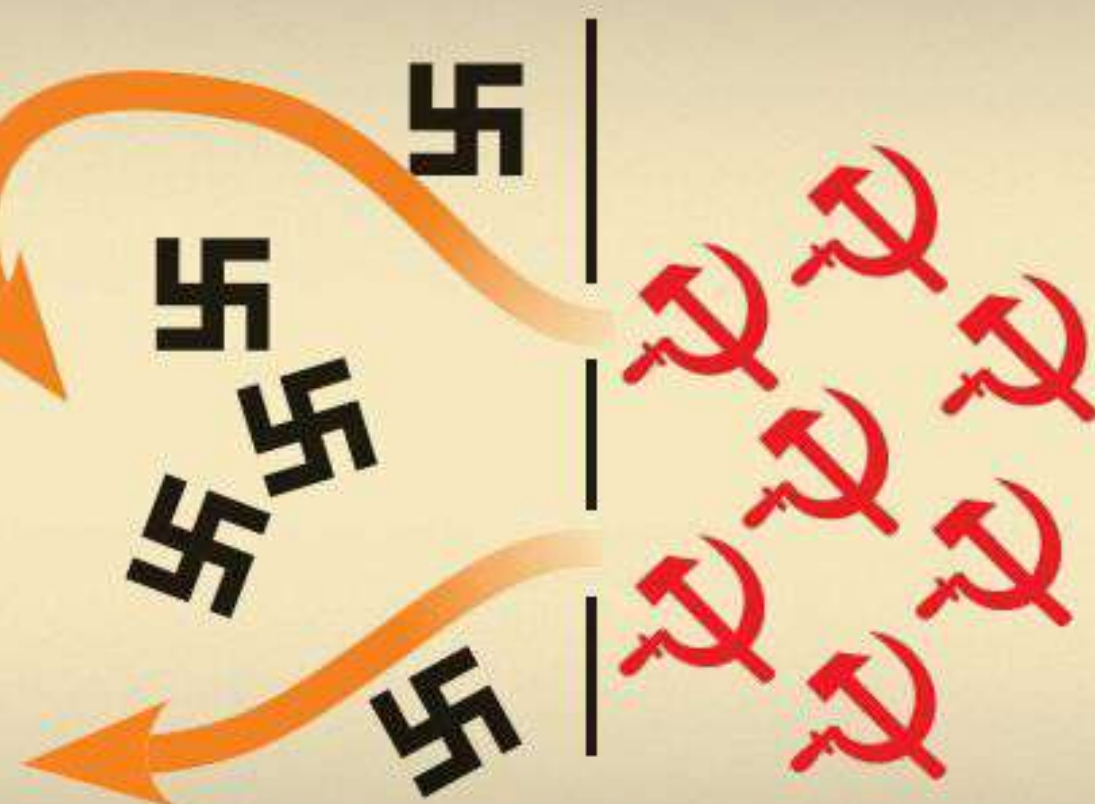
- 1** The army must advance towards the enemy's lines with several separate, concentrated units. The forces simultaneously strike against several points on the front, so that the opponent cannot focus his defence.



- 2** If some of the attacking units start to struggle, reserves are added so that the attack can continue until the enemy line yields and gaps appear in the front line.



- 3** Once holes have been made in the front, the attacking forces must penetrate behind the enemy troops and surround them as quickly as possible.



- 4** To prevent the enemy from falling back and reorganising, the attacking army must penetrate deep into the enemy's hinterland. Here the soldiers, with the help of air forces, must destroy supply and communication routes.

by soldiers in the field end the German leadership's delusion. Although intelligence officers tried to warn him, head of Army Group Centre, Ernst Busch, believed German high command (OKH), which assured him that the attack would take place in Ukraine.

Just one week before Operation Bagration, a German commander had described the impending Soviet attack to General Robert Martinek, leader of XXXIX Panzer Corps. The general, who was on a tour of inspection, was convinced, but had to admit that his warnings would never be heard in OKH.

"Whom God would destroy, he first strikes blind," Martinek lamented.

New tactics scared enemy

Early in the morning of 22nd June, at 03.05, it all kicked off above Armin



The Soviets had up to 33,000 guns and mortars at the beginning of the offensive.

Scheiderbauer's head. The army leadership was convinced that it was a sham attack. That very morning, Field Marshal Busch felt safe enough to leave his post to travel to a meeting with the Führer at the Berghof in Bavaria. However, the attack on Scheiderbauer's position was only the start. On the night of 22nd-23rd June, the Red Army carried out around 1,000 sorties. With their long-range aircraft, they bombed railway facilities and German posts far behind the front. The following morning, 23rd June, at 05.00, the Soviets launched the next major attack against the Germans.

The bombing lasted two hours. The air was filled with earth and dust, as the exploding shells advanced like a barrage

of fire behind German lines, forcing soldiers to cower in their positions.

An infantry attack followed – the Germans were in for another surprise.

"The enemy adopted ... new tactics. He no longer attacked as in the past on a broad front with very heavy artillery support, but instead employed

concentrated groups of infantry supported by highly concentrated and well controlled fire from heavy weapons. He went first for good

tactical ground to establish favourable initial positions. Behind these assault groups ... lay tank forces to follow on and break through," a daily report from the German 9th Army stated.

The success of the attack soon became apparent. By the afternoon,

the German officers were forced to admit that the 3rd Panzer Army would not be able to repulse the assault and that the strategically important city of Vitebsk was at risk.

From Berlin, OKH stated that it wasn't possible to send reinforcements. Hitler still believed that the main attack would take place further south.

Lightning warfare secured recapture

To lead the offensive, Stalin had chosen some of his most competent officers, including General Konstantin Rokossovsky, who had helped draft the strategy, and Marshal Georgy Zhukov.

Everything went according to plan right from the start. Around Vitebsk, the Red Army's mobile tank units advanced rapidly. During the initial bombardments, heavy tanks with ►

***"Whom God would
destroy, he first
strikes blind."***

General Robert Martinek, 1944



Soviets defeat swamps, scrub and Germans

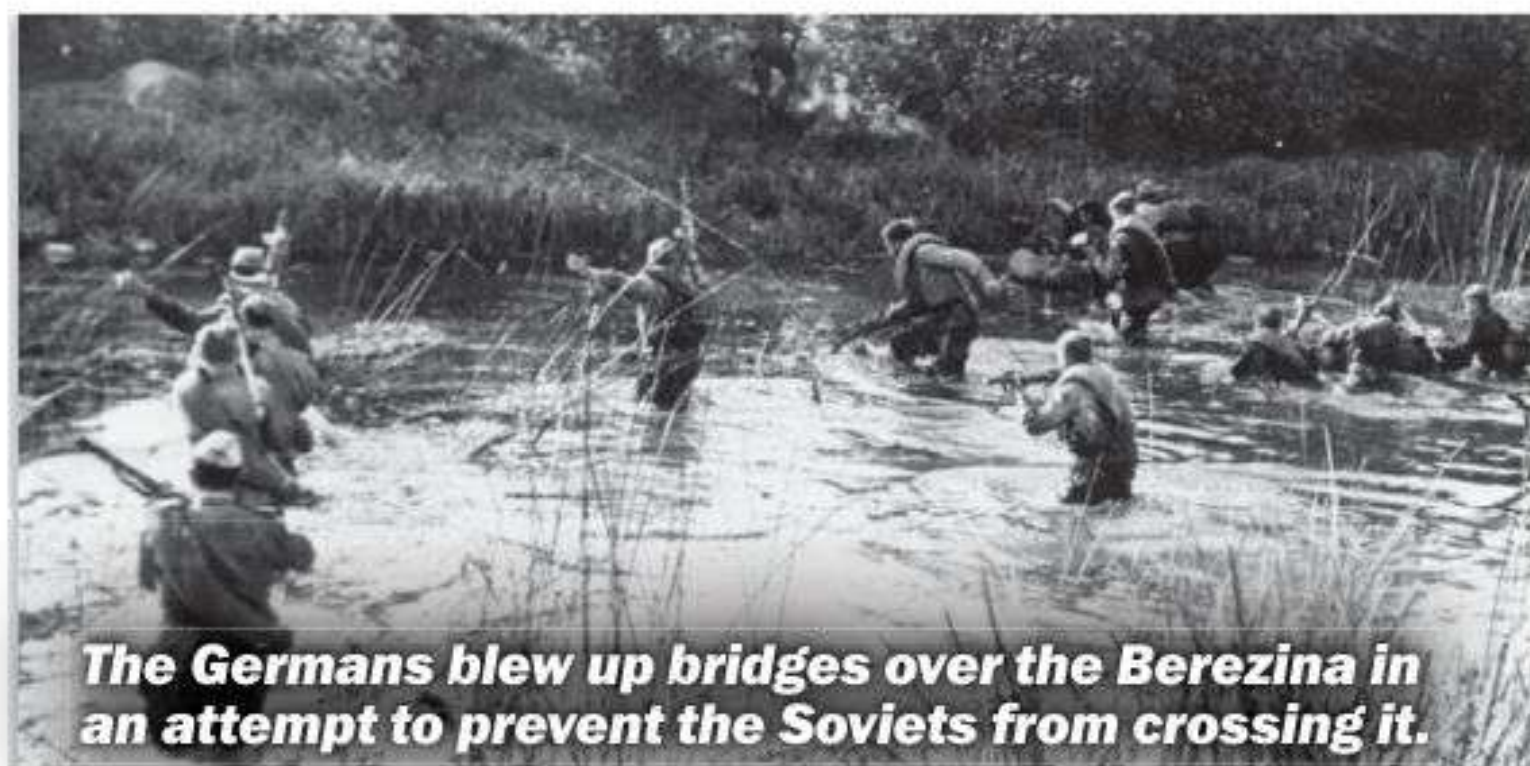
At the end of June, the Red Army is on its way to Minsk, and the Wehrmacht is on the defensive. The German troops are preparing to fight for the capital of Belarus, which Hitler is determined to hold at all costs. For the Soviets, the terrain around the city poses a challenge; forests, bogs and rivers block the advance, and are ideal hiding places for the German soldiers.

6 Wehrmacht survives in the forests

4th July: The capital has fallen, but groups of German soldiers have fled into the forests east of the city. Soviet infantrymen begin to fight the pockets of resistance. To start with, the Germans provide well-organised opposition, but as food and ammunition run out, the pockets collapse.

3 Soviets cross Berezina

30th June: The Germans have disappeared from the river, and the Soviet infantry builds bridges. The tanks cross and occupy the city of Borisov in the evening.



The Germans blew up bridges over the Berezina in an attempt to prevent the Soviets from crossing it.

The Berezina River was a natural defence for the Germans.

Minsk is within reach

1 22nd June 1944: The Red Army launches Operation Bagration along a 1,000-km front. Over the course of five days, the Germans are forced back around 200 km, and now the Soviets stand in front of Minsk. To capture the city, they must cross the 40-metre-wide Berezina River and an area of swamp around the Belarusian city.



Thanks to their heavily armoured T-34 tanks, Soviet troops advanced rapidly.

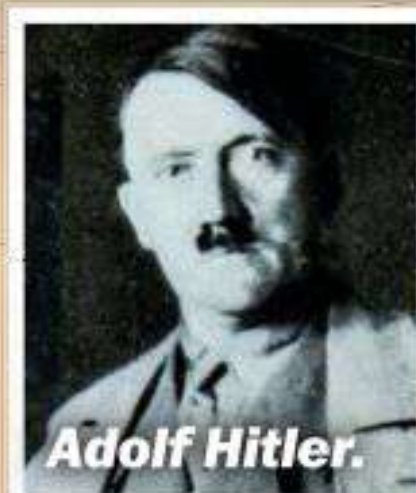
7 Escaped soldiers are defeated

9th July: Six days after the capture of Minsk, the last organised German resistance is defeated. Several thousand German soldiers have managed to escape into the surrounding swamps, where they continue the battle. Only 900 manage to reach behind Nazi lines – the rest are killed or captured by the Red Army.

Lakes and swamps were difficult for the Red Army's tanks to navigate.

Hitler: Hold Minsk at all costs!

In March 1944, Hitler designated 29 cities along the Eastern Front as strongholds – *Feste Plätze* – to be defended whatever it took. A general was assigned to each as commander.



SHUTTERSTOCK

5 Red Army captures Minsk

3rd July: Two hours after midnight, Soviet forces reach Minsk. The city is defended by a German garrison of 1,800 men as well as thousands of soldiers from decimated units. The war has turned the city into a smoking heap of ruins, and the Soviet liberation takes the form of house-to-house fighting. The German troops do their best to follow Hitler's order to hold the city, but after a day of intense fighting, the Soviets finally control Minsk.

The Soviets used tanks loaded with infantrymen to attack the city.



GETTY IMAGES

4 Panzer division put up fierce resistance

1st July: Near the city of Pleshchenitsy, the Soviets encounter the Germans' largest panzer unit. The confrontation develops into a week-long conflict. In the end, the Red Army wins, but both sides suffer heavy losses – 107 German tanks are destroyed, while the Soviets lose a total of 295.

2 German tanks strike back

29th June: Soviet tank troops must cross the Berezina River. During the crossing, the forces are greeted by heavy fire from an advanced German battalion. The Soviets are forced to withdraw.

Dense forests gave the Germans the opportunity to hide.

Soviets took over

Operation Bagration took place over a 1,000-km front. More than 1.6 million Soviet soldiers participated – divided into the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Belarussian Fronts, as well as the 1st Baltic Front. Along the way, the Red Army took important German bastions, such as Minsk, Tallinn and Vilnius. Facing the Soviets were 650,000 Germans who failed to stop the Red Army's march on Berlin.



C. 650,000 soldiers



C. 1,600,000 soldiers



Wehrmacht lost ability to attack

Operation Bagration ended with the German Army's largest defeat on the Eastern Front. Between 25 and 30 divisions perished – which meant the Germans lost at least 300,000 men. Wounded and missing made up about half of the casualties, and many of the missing soldiers were later captured and killed by the Red Army around the vast forests of Belarus. Several others were killed on their way to the prison camps, or died of starvation and disease during their years of captivity.

Of the 47 German commanders who fell victim to Operation Bagration, 31 were captured or reported missing. As many as nine German generals were killed. The Wehrmacht already lacked soldiers, and the officers, with their knowledge and experience, were almost impossible to replace. The loss of officers, soldiers and materiel weakened Germany so much that it was no longer able to carry out major offensives.

Huge German losses:

TANKS: around 2,000



GUNS: around 1,300



AIRCRAFT: 839 at the start of the attack – the number of losses is unknown.



ploughs had cleared the German minefields. After just two days of fighting, the defending German units were sent on a breakneck retreat.

As early as 27th June, the Red Army occupied Vitebsk, which Hitler had ordered to be held at all costs, but the troops along the entire front advanced rapidly. To the south, Rokossovsky led a major assault against the Germans at Bobruisk, approximately 150 kilometres south-east of Minsk.

The attack began on 24th June, but the terrain around the city was problematic. The area was swampy, making it difficult for the soldiers and their vehicles to advance.

Tanks drove through swamp

The Soviets refused to let the difficult terrain stop their advance – and the soldiers were well prepared. During preparations for the offensive, they'd learned to build improvised rafts and to use a kind of ski that had been developed for use in swamps and bogs. In the days before the attack, engineering troops had also built roads and wooden dams, so the men and their vehicles could advance.

To the Germans' surprise, Soviet tanks now appeared from the swampy surroundings – and they received air support from fighters and bombers. On 27th June, all roads into the city of Bobruisk were blocked, and six divisions of Germany's 9th Army were surrounded.

After that, air bombardments started in earnest. As many as 526 planes, including

400 bombers, attacked the besieged Germans. In less than an hour, the aircraft dropped 12,000 bombs. Soon the city was alight – aided by fires started by the Nazis themselves; they didn't want their own supplies to fall into Soviet hands.

Most German soldiers, however, soon realised what was happening and fled. Their vehicles had to zigzag to avoid the bombs – often resulting in the wheels sinking into the mud, leaving them stuck. In a panic, many soldiers sought refuge in the nearby Berezina River, where they were mercilessly shelled by Soviet soldiers approaching along the western bank.

"[M]any attempted to swim across the Berezina, but even this did not save them," wrote Rokossovsky, while Marshal Zhukov subsequently recounted, "The terror-stricken German soldiers scattered in every direction; those who did not surrender were killed."

The Germans who stayed fought to the last – it wasn't until 30th June that the city came under Soviet control.

War correspondent Vasily Grossman reached Bobruisk immediately after its liberation. He confirmed that the German forces had been virtually wiped out. "Corpses, hundreds and thousands of them, pave the road, lie in ditches, under the pines, in the green barley. In some places, vehicles have to drive over corpses, so densely they lie upon the ground," he wrote in the Red Army newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda (Red Star)*.

Huge losses broke Wehrmacht

For years, Hitler, Goebbels and other top Nazis had churned out propaganda about

"Terror-stricken soldiers scattered in every direction."

Marshal Georgy Zhukov, 1944

During the retreat through Belarus, the Germans had to leave tonnes of materiel behind.

“Big Three” laid plans in Tehran

As early as 1943, the Allies had agreed on how to defeat Adolf Hitler.
The strategy was to force the Germans to fight on two fronts.

During the summer of 1944, Operation Bagration was not the Germans' only problem. The Soviet offensive was just one part of a united Allied plan that, using a two-pronged approach, was intended to

squeeze all resistance out of Nazi Germany and force Hitler to his knees.

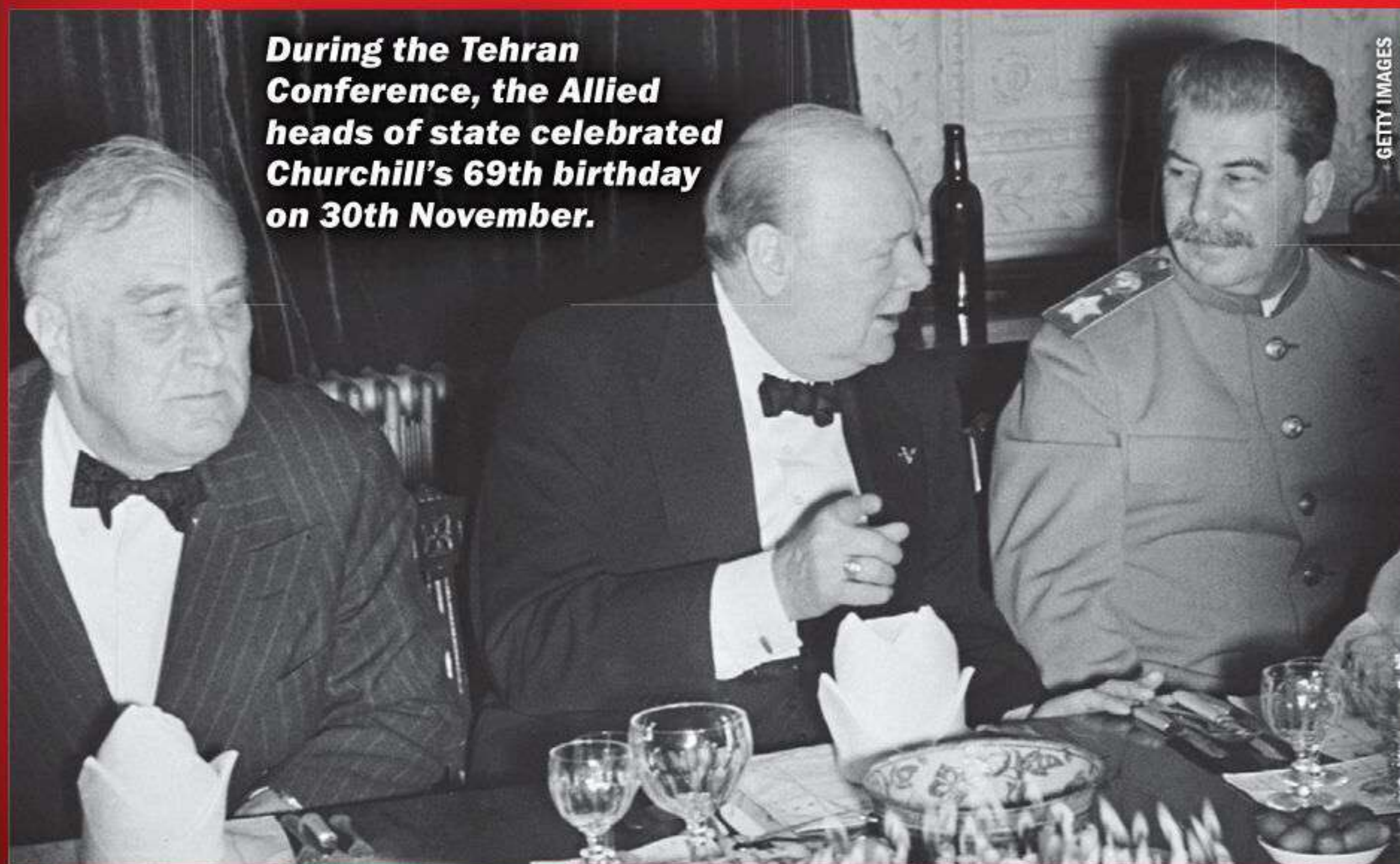
Half a year before Stalin's attack, he met with the other Allied leaders, President Franklin D Roosevelt and Prime

Minister Winston Churchill, at a conference in Iran's capital, Tehran.

At the meeting, which took place from 28th November to 1st December 1943, the three men agreed upon how to press Hitler's Germany on two fronts. Churchill and Roosevelt promised to launch Operation Overlord, a large-scale landing in France (D-Day), while Stalin was to attack the Germans in the East. Once the Allies had broken through the German lines, they could, in turn, approach the German capital, Berlin.

Operation Overlord began on 6th June 1944, and Stalin's major offensive, Operation Bagration, followed after a few weeks.

Overlord tied up 58 German divisions in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Without the Allied landings, the Germans would have been able to transfer many of those divisions to the Eastern Front when Stalin's troops launched Operation Bagration.



the Soviet soldiers being Slavic subhumans who were easily defeated. Now someone had to pay for the Wehrmacht's embarrassing defeat. On 27th June, Hitler therefore called Field Marshal Ernst Busch back to the Berghof to fire him. The Führer appointed the experienced Field Marshal Walter Model as the new leader of Army Group Centre.

But not even Model, who was known for being able to save even the most desperate military situations, could stop the Soviets rolling into Minsk.

The Red Army liberated the Belarusian capital on 3rd July. Residents danced in the streets, welcoming Red Army soldiers with flowers. Despite the festive mood, Minsk was a sorry sight.

“The capital of Belarus was barely recognisable. I had commanded a regiment there for seven years and knew well every street ... Now everything was in ruins ... The people of Minsk were a pitiful sight, exhausted and haggard, many of them in tears,” Marshal Zhukov later recalled.

Despite the devastation, victory was within reach. Six days later, on 9th July,

the Red Army defeated the last organised German resistance in the forests around Minsk. Zhukov flew to Moscow to meet with Stalin. The Soviet leader received him in his *dacha* (cottage) on the outskirts of Moscow. Three years earlier, Stalin had withdrawn into a depression-like state when the Germans invaded, but now the Soviet leader smiled broadly.

“Stalin was in good humour and joked,” Zhukov recalled of the meeting.

The two men duly celebrated the victory with a hearty breakfast. Nine days later, Stalin held the official victory parade in Moscow, where 50,000 German prisoners of war were put on show to be mocked and humiliated.

The triumph, however, had cost dearly. The total losses for Operation Bagration are unknown, but according to historians, the Red Army lost up to 180,000 soldiers – dead and missing – while over half a million were wounded.

Germany lost at least 300,000 soldiers, equivalent to 25-30 divisions. But German losses went deeper than the numbers on the surface; while Stalin had plenty of fresh soldiers ready and waiting,

the Wehrmacht desperately lacked manpower after five years of war, and Operation Bagration did irreparable damage to its strength.

Armin Scheiderbauer, the German soldier who endured Operation Bagration suffering from a heavy hangover, escaped the massacre at Minsk and fled to the west. The following year, he was wounded in combat and spent two years in a Soviet prisoner of war camp. Scheiderbauer made it home to Vienna, while thousands of his comrades ended their days in the thick forests and swamps of Belarus.

Konstantin Rokossovsky, one of the brains behind Operation Bagration, was promoted to marshal during the offensive.

FURTHER READING



• Anthony Tucker-Jones: *Stalin's Revenge*, Pen & Sword, 2009 • Richard W Harrison: *Operation Bagration – The Rout of the German Forces in Belorussia*, Helion and Company, 2016 • Steven J Zaloga: *Bagration 1944*, Osprey, 1996

60 kilometres from Berlin:

Rag-tag army



90,000 German soldiers waited for 900,00 Soviets at Seelow Heights. The photo is from a modern re-enactment of the battle.

GREGORL/DEVIANART

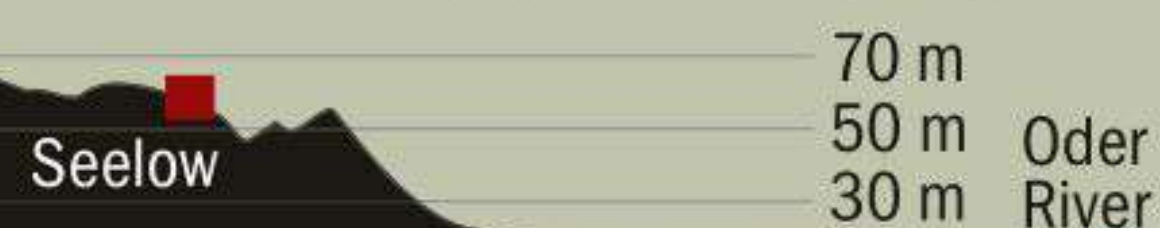
held up Stalin

Marshal Georgy Zhukov of the Red Army was confident of a quick victory when he unleashed his tanks in April 1945. They rumbled towards the Seelow Heights, but Zhukov had miscalculated. Steep, muddy slopes and a small but determined German force blocked the way for the 900,000 Soviet troops.

GERMANY/1945

The Reichsstraße 1 road leads from Königsberg to Berlin. Soviet Marshal Zhukov is using it to advance on the German capital. But before him rise the steep slopes of the Seelow Heights and a formidable line of German defenders.

Seelow Heights, with their high slopes, formed the Germans' main line of defence.



BY ELSE CHRISTENSEN

Private Martin Kleint took a deep drag on his cigarette. It was nearly 03.00 and the 18-year-old soldier hadn't slept a wink. The private in the Panzer Division Kurmark was manning a trench with his comrades on the Seelow Heights, around 60 kilometres east of Berlin.

All night the men had listened to the thunder of guns from the Red Army positions to the east. Night-time bombardments were nothing new. The soldiers were used to listening to the Soviet *"Morgenkonzert"* (morning concert), as they dubbed the regular attacks aimed at disturbing their rest.

The explosions were rapidly getting nearer. Kleint felt a knot in his stomach – this could be it. He barely had time to acknowledge the thought before a deep rumble shook the ground. Sand and pebbles rattled down the side of the trench as the Soviet Katyusha batteries kicked in with their persistent howl. The sky was lit up by the glow of flares and phosphorous raining down from Soviet



Soviet forces began the Battle of Seelow Heights by bombarding the German defensive positions with thousands of artillery shells and Katyusha rockets.

aircraft over the German positions. The glare lit up the white phosphorous clouds, which danced like ghosts in the air. Kleint stubbed out his cigarette and grabbed his helmet.

"Now we're in for it," said the soldier next to him in a hoarse voice. A moment later, a shell struck close by, and earth cascaded into the trench.

It was 03.00 on 16th April 1945, and the Red Army's Marshal Georgy Zhukov and his 1st Belarusian Front had launched a massive attack on the German positions on Seelow Heights just west of the Polish-German border. The Germans were in full retreat and the war was almost won. This hill near the town of

Seelow was the last remaining obstacle for the Soviet forces. Behind it the Reichsstraße 1 road continued directly on to Berlin and final victory over the Third Reich.

Hitler's last stand

"[They will] bleed to death before the capital of the German Reich."

Adolf Hitler in his Führer Order of the Day for 14th April 1945.

Soviets believed victory would be swift

Red Army troops had been driving the Germans out of occupied Poland, metre by metre, since 12th January 1945. In the

space of two short weeks, the Soviet army advanced 438 km from the Vistula River, which flowed through the heart of modern-day Poland, to the Oder River, just 69 km from Berlin.

Zhukov knew the German army was crumbling. It was short of men, ammunition and fuel. When, on 22nd January, he began to send his forces across the Oder River at the town of Küstrin, which the Red Army had just captured, the marshal was convinced victory wasn't far off.

Unfortunately, after the Soviets had established a bridgehead on the western bank, the advance was temporarily halted when they encountered pockets of German resistance. It wasn't until early April that Zhukov was finally ready to resume his campaign – it was time for the Soviets' last major push. Stalin had decreed that the Red Army would take the German capital on 22nd April – the birthday of the late revolutionary hero Vladimir Lenin.

Germans lacked everything

Zhukov's plan was to break through at the Seelow Heights, a large ridge around

Civilians fled from the Red Army

"Ivan is coming!" came the desperate shouts of warning from one German civilian to another. The fierce fighting around Seelow could be heard in the distance, and the booming guns caused panic among the locals.

"Like figures from the Underworld, the refugees hurried past," wrote one German soldier of the thousands of refugees trying to get away.

Women in particular feared the arrival of Red Army soldiers, for they knew from accounts from the east that there was a high risk of rape in the wake of the Soviet advance. In Berlin, too, people prepared themselves. Here, older men, with the help of women and children, built barricades and gathered food and other necessities to survive the siege they were waiting for.



A German boy and his mother try to save the family's belongings before the Soviets arrive.

The plain Hero of the Soviet Union medal was the highest that could be awarded.



IMAGESELECT & SHUTTERSTOCK

10 km west of the Oder and about 60 km east of Berlin. If the Russian's plan succeeded, the tanks would roll through the German positions on the ridge and straight on to the capital.

The Wehrmacht's 9th Army had fortified the ridge with 90,000 men and 512 tanks. The ridge itself constituted an effective fortification, with its extremely steep slopes reaching up to 60 metres in height. The heights formed part of the defensive line that the Germans called the Hardenberg-Stellung. The line ran along the edge of the Seelow Heights and the Alte Oder, a tributary of the main Oder River. It comprised two to three rows of trenches guarded by heavily armed positions, numerous observation posts, and anti-tank obstacles, such as deep trenches. The high ground was also fortified with artillery positions. From nearby airbases, around 300 fighter planes stood ready on the runways.

Hitler goaded the Soviets in his usual bombastic style: "For the last time our deadly enemies, the Jewish Bolsheviks, have rallied their massive forces for an attack," the dictator wrote in his Führer-Order-of-the-Day for 14th April 1945.

"They intend to destroy Germany and to exterminate our people... We have been expecting this attack, and since January this year have done everything possible to build up a strong front. The enemy will be received with massive artillery fire.

"Gaps in our infantry have been filled by countless [new] emergency units, newly raised units and Volkssturm. This time the Bolsheviks [will] bleed to death before the capital of the German Reich."

As always, Hitler's words bore little resemblance to reality. The German army was short of everything, and the Volkssturm were little more than a hastily raised militia comprising old men and young boys, prompting General Gotthard Heinrici, who had overall responsibility for the 9th Army as commander of Army Group Vistula, to ask Hitler for more tank forces ahead of the battle. The dictator refused, having sent a large number of tanks to Hungary in March to defend the few oil fields still in German hands.

Heinrici was luckier when he requested more soldiers on 6th April. SS commander Himmler, Grand Admiral Dönitz and Reichsmarschall Göring sent the last of their reserves to the Seelow Heights. These were primarily Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine personnel whose ships and planes had either been

Stalin forced his marshals to a race

Two Soviet marshals fought to reach Berlin first, fearing the wrath of Stalin. It would cost the Red Army dearly at Seelow Heights.

Georgy Zhukov's efforts to quickly take Berlin were not purely down to professional pride. Zhukov also wanted to outdo his arch-rival, Marshal Ivan Konev. Konev was advancing on Berlin from the south with his 1st Ukrainian Front, while Zhukov approached from the north with his troops, which made up the 1st Belarusian Front.

Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin was notoriously merciless to officers who let him down in the field – and now both men feared they would pay with their careers or their lives if they didn't get to the German capital first. Throughout the offensive, Stalin deliberately played the two senior officers off against each other to hasten the capture of Berlin.

Today, historians believe that the race pushed the two military leaders to carry out pre-emptive raids like the one Zhukov launched at Seelow Heights, with unnecessarily high casualties. Stalin eventually let Zhukov take Berlin, while Konev was sent south-west to meet the Americans.

Georgy Zhukov

Ivan Konev

Rivals had similar backgrounds

Same age: Zhukov and Konev were born in the Russian Empire in 1896 and 1897 respectively.

Both came from the country: The two men were of peasant stock. During World War I, they enlisted in the Tsar's army, before later fighting in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, from where they launched their military careers.

Highly decorated: Both Zhukov and Konev were honoured with the order Hero of the Soviet Union, the country's highest award.

Zhukov and Konev were buried in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis in Moscow – a Soviet honour.

destroyed or left immobilised due to a chronic lack of fuel.

Heinrici also drafted in men from the police, customs service and RAD, the Reich Labour Service, the latter of which was mainly engaged in construction but also supplied men for the anti-aircraft guns. Few had any experience serving in the infantry, and many were so young that war service was completely alien to them. Ammunition supplies were also

becoming acute – the troops had only enough shells for a few days' fighting, for example.

Battle didn't go to plan

Marshal Zhukov had every reason to expect a quick victory. With 900,000 men at his disposal, his army was ten times larger than the enemy's. Soviet aircraft also enjoyed a 10:1 advantage, ►

while the Germans' paltry 512 tanks were no match for the Red Army's 3,000.

The Soviets planned for battle at a conference held from 5th to 7th April at Zhukov's headquarters at a school in Landsberg. The marshal's knowledge of the battlefield terrain came from eight reconnaissance flights, interrogations of German prisoners of war, and documents intercepted by the intelligence service.

Based on the information gathered, the strategists had created a landscape model that the officers used for planning. The model and map revealed to command that the capture of the ridge might be slower than the previous advance, but Zhukov and his officers weren't concerned:

"The victories of our troops in previous battles had given us much confidence. No one doubted that we would sweep aside the whole of the enemy fortifications on the approaches to

Berlin," Colonel General Mikhail Katukov later wrote.

One day would be enough to capture the ridge, Zhukov concluded.

The Soviet plan was to launch a surprise attack early in the morning of 16th April, which would allow the Red Army to easily overrun German positions on the ridge.

This part of the plan went well, creating panic among German ranks. When the attack started, Second Lieutenant Karl-Hermann Tams was at the front edge of Seelow's defences:

"The whole Oder valley bed shook," he recalled. "The hurricane of fire reached out to the Seelow Heights. It seemed as if the earth were reaching up into the sky like a dense wall... We were soon covered in sand, dirt and glass splinters. None of us had experienced anything like it before, and would not have believed it possible."

The attack continued, lighting up the night sky with a golden red hue: "In the field of view the eastern sky was in flames," recalled one tank commander.

"The night has gone mad," added Friedhelm Schöneck. "The sky is glowing red as if it will crack open at any moment... The ground rocks, heaves and sways like a ship in a Force 10 gale... The bursting and howling of the shells, the whistling and hissing of

shrapnel fills the air or what remains of it for us to breathe."

The artillery finally fell silent after two and a half hours. In all, 8,983 Russian guns and mortars had bombarded Seelow Heights and the area immediately north of the ridge with tens of thousands of shells. The Germans had barely responded and for a moment Zhukov believed they'd been crushed.

But the Germans had tricked the Soviets. From prisoner interrogations, they'd learned when the attack would take place, and Heinrici had secretly withdrawn most of his infantry from the front line the previous evening. In this way, he spared his forces to continue the fight against the Soviet advance.

"They pulled back their troops a good eight kilometres. Our artillery hit everything but the enemy," remarked an exasperated Colonel General Vasily Kuznetsov, in command of Zhukov's shock troops.

Nor did the 143 searchlights used by Zhukov to light up the front during the attack have the effect the marshal had hoped for. Instead of blinding the enemy and revealing the German positions, the searchlights exposed the Soviet attackers, who became clearly outlined as dark silhouettes as they advanced.

Mud delayed advance

The Soviets quickly recovered from this setback, however, and in daylight on 17th April the attack continued with renewed vigour.

Red Army tanks rolled rapidly forward, and heavy bombers and Ilyushin Il-2 Sturmovik fighter-bombers filled the air. The small planes, which Stalin described as "essential to the Red Army as air and bread", constantly strafed the German

Hitler's last stand

"The whole Oder valley bed shook."

L'tenant Karl-Hermann Tams, 1945.



Martin Kleint had served in the air defence when, aged 18, he was deployed to the Seelow Heights front.



At Seelow Heights, regular German troops fought alongside boys and old men from the Volkssturm militia.

GETTY IMAGES

German pilots signed up for kamikaze operations

In 1944, 70 volunteers chose to join the suicide Leonidas squadron.

They were first deployed in the Battle of Seelow Heights.

As the war progressed, the Nazis were forced to acknowledge that the Allies were militarily superior. To redress the balance of power, Otto Skorzeny – a senior Nazi specialising in commando operations behind enemy lines – and test pilot Hanna Reitsch proposed that the Luftwaffe set up a suicide unit.

Pilots would steer their aircraft into a target such as a bridge, enemy position or power station. The impact would trigger a large explosive charge in the aircraft. Theoretically, the pilot could parachute out, but their chance of survival was very small.

The advantage of suicide pilots was that they could use worn-out planes and

the actions required very little fuel, because the planes only needed enough to reach their target.

Hitler was not enthusiastic about the idea, but still allowed the Luftwaffe to recruit volunteers. In total, 70 signed up for the unit, which was nicknamed the Leonidas Squadron, a reference to ancient Greece, where King Leonidas, with a small force of 300 Spartans, held off the Persian king's huge army at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC. The king and his soldiers were all eventually killed, but their heroism bought the Greeks valuable time.

In the summer of 1944, the German pilots began training, but the unit only saw action during the

Nazi darling came up with the idea

From the 1930s until the end of the war, female test pilot Hanna Reitsch was a star of Nazi propaganda. As a media darling, she was well acquainted with the upper circles of the Nazi regime and was able to personally propose her idea of suicide pilots to Hitler.

Having received Hitler's approval, Reitsch even test-flew a manned version of the V-1 missile in which the suicide pilots were earmarked to fly.

Blonde hair and strong piloting skills made Hanna Reitsch a superstar.

Battle of Seelow Heights. From 17th to 20th April, the squadron destroyed – according to the Luftwaffe's own figures – 17 bridges over the Oder River, but the figure is probably exaggerated.

The actions cost 35 pilots their lives. Major General Robert Fuchs telegraphed the names of the killed pilots to Hitler on 20th April 1945 as a birthday gift.

Originally, the idea was for the suicide pilots to fly a manned V-1 missile. That plan was abandoned – instead, they flew regular planes rigged with heavy bombs.

defensive positions. The Germans had few planes and limited fuel, meaning the fight was unequal from the start.

"The Luftwaffe had really supported the troops on the ground with all their might (about 300 machines) but could not stop the Russians from commanding the air," noted 9th Army commander General Theodor Busse.

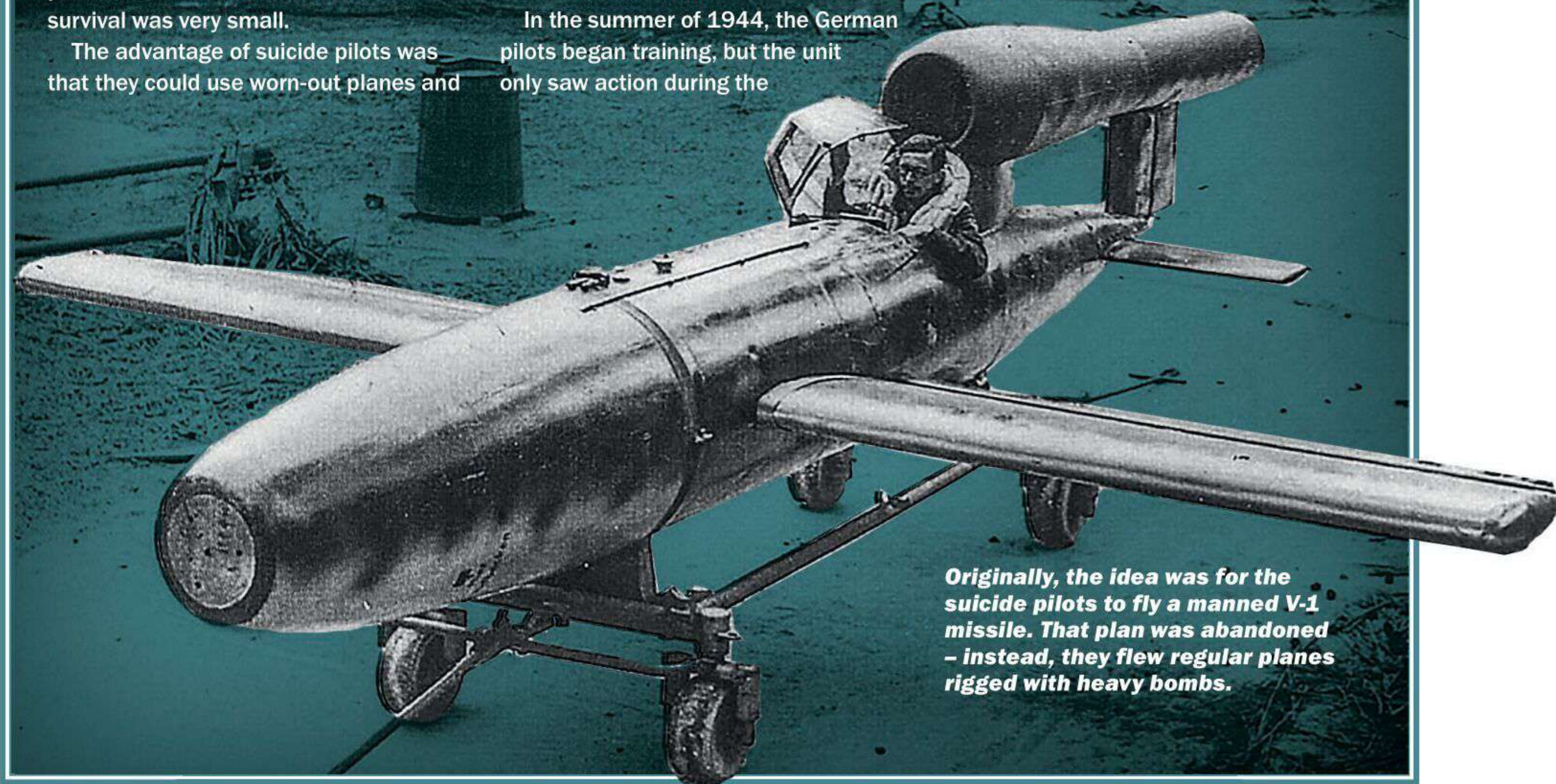
Soviet planes recorded the day's greatest success when they struck a

German ammunition depot, which vanished in a violent explosion of fire and smoke. On the ground, the Red Army fared less well. Its advance met stiff resistance because Germany's leading generals were fully aware of the high ground's great strategic advantages.

"The heights formed the critical point for the Russian armoured forces. Their retention or loss, dependent upon the situation and strengths, would decide

the result of the coming battle," Busse had written beforehand.

The Germans fortified the area with everything at their disposal. Before the battle, soldiers had laid mines on fields and other flat stretches that could be used as access roads to the heights. The Germans covered approach roads with positions ready to meet the attackers with artillery and machine-gun fire from several sides. The terrain was also ►



littered with tank traps in the form of deep trenches. Three metres deep and up to 3.5 metres wide, they posed serious obstacles to the Soviets.

The terrain – made soft and muddy by the spring rains – also aided the Germans: “For the first two kilometres our rifle units and tanks advanced under cover of the moving barrage successfully, though slowly. But then the machines,

which had to get past the streams and canals, began to be left behind,” reported Colonel General Vassily Chuikov of the Red Army.

Hitler's last stand

“Our [guns] hit everything but the enemy.”

Colonel General Kuznetsov on the artillery at Seelow Heights, 1945.

The Soviet soldiers slowly fought their way through a marshy landscape full of craters and bodies from the shelling. Tanks quickly created traffic jams on the few roads that led through the area. In several places, the Red Army was also forced to stop and build bridges before its troops could cross marshland and canals.

Soviets got stuck in the mud

At noon, a tank unit finally managed to penetrate the front line of the German defence to reach the foot of the Seelow Heights. With engines roaring, the

gargantuan machines attempted to climb the ridge. They clung on like metal-skinned beetles, but most found the effort too great – the slopes were too steep for the heavy tanks to negotiate.

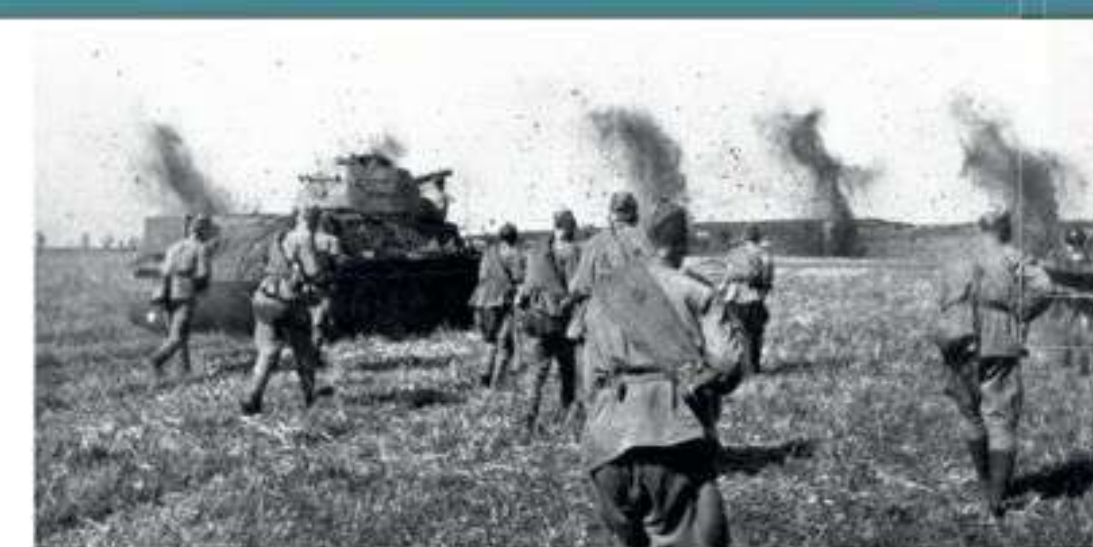
The tanks turned around and instead tried to snake their way up narrow roads that led to nearby villages. But the Germans had anticipated this move and stood ready with 88-mm guns and infantrymen armed with the recoilless Panzerfaust bazooka, which they could fire from their shoulder. The narrow passages allowed the Germans to concentrate fire directly on the advancing troops – a move that was both effective and saved ammunition.

Zhukov observed the battle from the Reitwein Spur, a ridge behind the front. From his command post in a primitive bunker, the marshal watched the tanks struggle through his powerful ►

STRENGTH RATIO

SOVIET UNION*		GERMANY	
	Soldiers: 900,000		Soldiers: 90,836
	Tanks: 3,059		Tanks: 512
	Guns and rockets: 17,824		Guns and rockets: 2,625
	Aircraft: 3,000		Aircraft: 300

*Figures are a combined total of Marshal Zhukov's and Konev's armies advancing towards Berlin from the east and south.



The Soviets depended on tanks for the upcoming battle for Berlin.

3 Seelow Heights is the last stop before Berlin

On 16th April, the Red Army finally reaches the Seelow Heights. Despite massive bombardments, the Germans' defensive lines are not destroyed. The path across the floodplain to the ridge will therefore prove costly for Soviet troops. On 17th April they reach the ridge itself, which proves too steep for the tanks. Instead, they have to use the small, winding roads where the Germans lie in wait. It's not until 19th April that the Red Army breaks through. The road to Berlin is open.

4 wrong decisions delayed Zhukov

1. Inadequate intelligence: Usually Soviet intelligence officers surveyed an area thoroughly before an offensive, but this time Zhukov made do with accounts from prisoners of war and aerial photographs that failed to give a realistic impression of the difficulties the ridge and its surrounding terrain would pose for the soldiers.

2. Crowding on the battlefield: Zhukov attacked with too many soldiers. The cramped space below the ridge meant that the Germans had an easy time hitting targets.

3. The Germans knew the attack plans: Soviet POWs and intercepted documents revealed when Zhukov would attack. German soldiers were pulled back just before the Red Army launched its first bombardment on 16th April.

4. Floodlights on the battlefield: As many as 143 Soviet floodlights illuminated the battlefield as Red Army forces attacked in the early morning of 16th April. Zhukov's intention was to blind the Germans, but the trick worked against him. Instead, the bright light exposed the Soviet soldiers and turned them into targets.

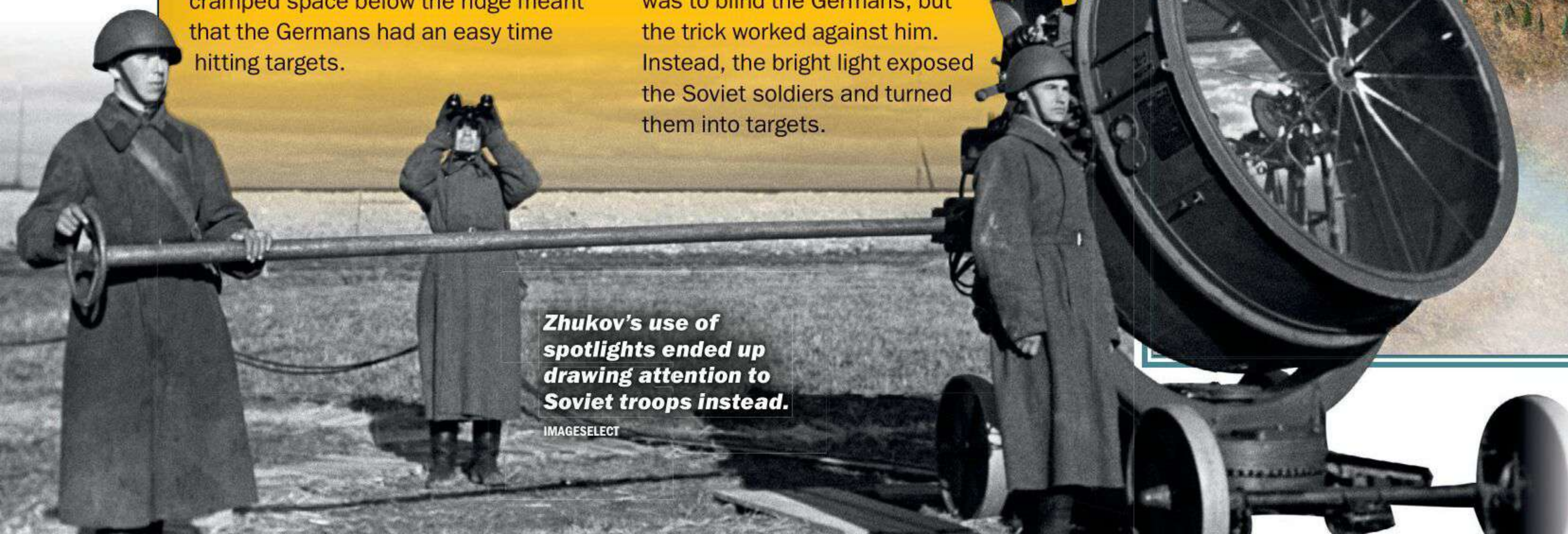
Zhukov's use of spotlights ended up drawing attention to Soviet troops instead.

IMAGESELECT

German forces set up ambushes in the area's woods and scrubland.

Zhukov follows the battle from a ridge on the Reitwein Spur.

REITWEIN SPUR



Terrain helped the Germans

Mud, swamp and high, steep slopes – the terrain west of the River Oder provided a natural defence that even the most tenacious army would find difficult to penetrate. The Germans took full advantage of the landscape to put up stubborn resistance to the Red Army.



2 German resistance slows Soviet advance

When the River Oder is finally crossed, Soviet soldiers must cross the flat floodplain at the foot of the Seelow Heights. The Red Army expects to rapidly advance, but boggy terrain, ambushes, a lack of roads and fierce German resistance make the path a difficult and slow one.



German soldiers wait for the Soviets in the area in front of the Heights.

1 Soviets cross the River Oder

On 12th January 1945, the Red Army launches a major offensive across the Eastern Front. The aim is to capture Berlin and settle the war. One of the final stages is to traverse the wide Oder River. One crossing point is at the town of Küstrin, where several bridges lead across. The battle lasts for weeks, and 95% of the houses in the old fortress town are razed to the ground before the Red Army is finally able to cross the river.



After weeks of fighting, the Red Army finally managed to cross the Oder.



The floodplain in front of the Seelow Heights was filled with hidden German artillery positions.

IMAGESELECT

binoculars. The aerial photographs he'd used to plan the attack had failed to provide an accurate picture of the terrain – and in particular, the true gradient of the slopes. The lack of progress was delaying the attack and threatened to jeopardise Stalin's whole plan.

Zhukov knew that Stalin expected him to capture Berlin before the US arrived. If the Americans took the capital, the Soviets would lose face and might miss out on important military secrets, such as knowledge of the German nuclear programme. And Zhukov could expect an uncertain future if he failed to live up to Stalin's expectations.

When Chuikov, one of Zhukov's most trusted officers, reported in a daze that his troops were barely moving, Zhukov exploded: "What the hell do you mean – your troops are pinned down?"

Chuikov was aware of Zhukov's fiery temper, and responded calmly: "Comrade Marshal, whether we are pinned down temporarily or not, the offensive will most certainly succeed. But resistance has stiffened for the moment and is holding us up."

Chuikov's words did not reassure Zhukov about the lack of progress. His mood wasn't helped by a mid-afternoon

radio call with Stalin: "So you've underestimated the enemy on the Berlin axis," the dictator remarked coolly. "I was thinking that you were already on the approaches to Berlin, but you're still on the Seelow Heights. Things have started more successfully for Konev," he added acidly, a reference to Zhukov's rival, Ivan Konev, whose forces were heading towards Berlin from the south.

As the day progressed, rain made the terrain even boggier. Panicked by the impasse, Zhukov changed

the attack plan so that two tank armies could advance ahead of the slow infantry in the hope of achieving a breakthrough.

The result was chaos. The tank armies found themselves trapped behind the vehicles of two other armies, and officers in charge of traffic control had no idea who to wave forward and who to hold back.

Those tanks that did get through soon became prey to the German defences. In the confusion, they were ambushed and came under heavy fire from German soldiers. When darkness fell, despite Zhukov's

efforts, Seelow Heights remained firmly in German hands.

Suicide pilots shocked the Soviets

That evening Zhukov spoke again to Stalin over the radio-telephone: "By the end of the day, tomorrow, 17th April, the defence of Seelow Heights will be broken," the marshal promised.

"I am convinced that the more troops the enemy sends against us here, the easier it will be to capture Berlin. It is much easier to destroy troops in open countryside than in a fortified city," Zhukov added, trying to convince Stalin that the situation was under control.

Next morning dawned with clear blue skies – ideal weather for the superior Soviet bombers.

"Dawn brought yet another blast of artillery fire, which was supplemented and supported by wave after wave of bombing attacks by heavy aircraft. It was horrific," recalled Lieutenant Tams.

The bombers were accompanied by the smaller Ilyushin Il-2 ground attack ►

Hitler's last stand

"What the hell do you mean – your troops are pinned down?"

Marshal Zhukov to Colonel General Vassily Chuikov, 1945.



aircraft, which swarmed over the trenches on Seelow Heights. Along the Oder, houses and villages continued to burn from the previous day's attack. The smell of burning flesh from livestock hung heavy over the floodplain.

To counter the Soviet onslaught, the Germans sent all the Focke-Wulf fighters they could into the air. German pilots were tasked with destroying the bridges that brought fresh Red Army troops and supplies across the Oder.

The Soviets observed a completely unexpected phenomenon – suicide pilots: “German pilots frequently death-dive into Russian bombers, causing both [to] plunge flaming groundwards,” one unnamed source reported.

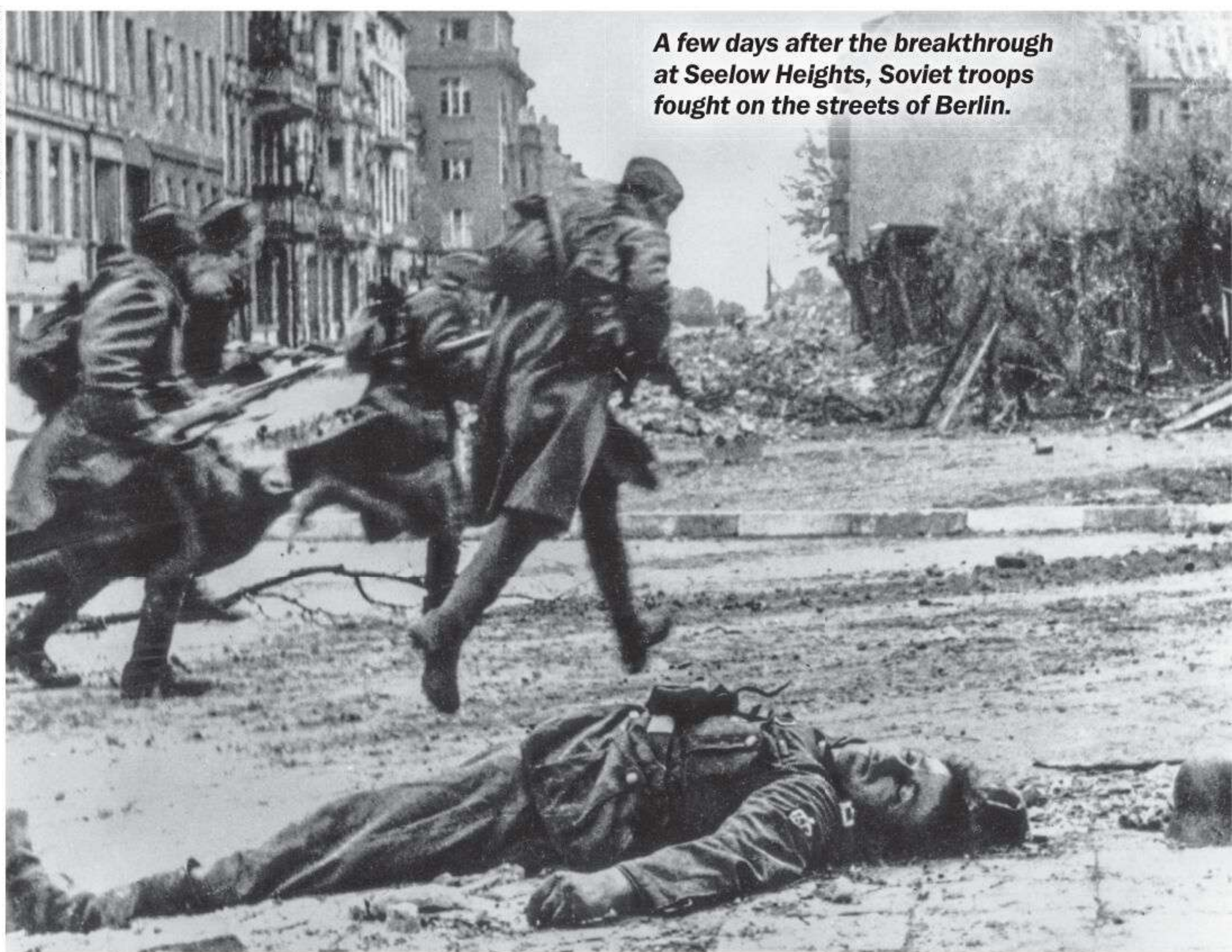
While some of Zhukov's forces attacked the centre of the front line, other Red Army units moved against the flanks. General Busse had been promised reinforcements the day before, and troops from SS-Division Nordland, a unit composed mainly of Scandinavian and Estonian volunteers, finally appeared.

Danish gunner Hans Hansen was deployed with his battery to the village of Dolgelin, located in the area that formed the right flank of the defence, between Seelow itself and Zhukov's command post. As they were pushed back, Hansen saw flashes of light from battles to the west, where the US army was advancing.

Hansen and other soldiers in the area – including Private Martin Kleint – dug themselves into positions outside Dolgelin, which burned after the Soviet bombardment. Throughout the morning they were subject to more artillery fire, but at 10.00 things became serious.

“Eventually the artillery fire broke off, and the Russian storm troops appeared immediately [attacking] with their

AKG-IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX



A few days after the breakthrough at Seelow Heights, Soviet troops fought on the streets of Berlin.

excited cries of ‘Hooray! Hooray!’,” Hansen subsequently recalled.

The German soldiers successfully defended themselves against the advancing enemy, and when the Soviets were finally driven back, Kleint and his unit took the opportunity to enter the village, where they entrenched themselves in the railway station. Here they took what respite they could overnight, knowing full well the battle was not yet over.

Numerical superiority ensured victory

As darkness descended, frustration rose in both camps. General Busse knew the 9th Army couldn't hold out much longer

as the death toll mounted. The Soviets estimated that on the second day of the battle – 17th April – they'd killed 3,200 Germans at Seelow. But at the same time, Zhukov was troubled by the fact he'd not been able to keep his promise to Stalin.

Although the Red Army was slowly gaining ground, Seelow Heights was not yet in Soviet hands. The marshal knew that Stalin's patience would not last much longer. It was now or never.

On the morning of 18th April, Zhukov ordered his soldiers to drive their guns and rocket batteries as far forward as

Berlin fell in a week

Only 19 days passed from the German defeat at Seelow Heights until General Alfred Jodl signed the country's surrender. During that period, Hitler had committed suicide and Berlin had been bombed beyond all recognition.

20th
APRIL

The Battle of Seelow Heights is lost, and Zhukov fires the first shells at Berlin.

21st
APRIL

Zhukov and his 1st Belarusian Front reach the outskirts of Berlin. Here civilians take up the fight.

23rd
APRIL

Fierce fighting takes place in the city's outer districts. One by one, they fall to the Soviets.

25th
APRIL

The Red Army surrounds Berlin, where two million German civilians have remained.

29th
APRIL

Soviet troops cross the Moltke Bridge over the River Spree near the site of today's main railway station. From here, the Red Army pours into Berlin's streets, where mainly women, children and old people are all who remain.

On 2nd May, Red Army soldiers raised the Soviet flag over the shattered German Reichstag.

they could. At the same time, he ordered his soldiers to advance in even greater numbers and to keep going until their objective had been reached.

Following a similar artillery bombardment and air strike to that of previous days, the Red Army attacked with full force. The Germans continued to hold out along the defensive line on its flanks at the towns of Frankfurt (Oder) in the south, and Wriezen in the north. In the centre, however, the defending troops began to fall back and give way to the masses of Soviet soldiers and artillery pressing them. By mid-morning, at 09.40, the duty officer at Army Group Vistula headquarters received the message that "leading enemy armoured groups had broken through". The Red Army were now on Reichsstraße 1 and the direct road to Berlin.

SS-Division Nordland had just reached the area west of the town of Seelow when "no sooner had we arrived than the Russians attacked head-on with a large armoured force", reported Hans Hansen.

Although Hansen's force was able to train its 88-mm anti-tank weapons on the Soviets, the tanks simply changed direction, turning westwards unopposed.

"There was no doubt where they were going: to Berlin!" he recounted.

German commanders had the same intelligence, and after conferring with Basse, General Heinrici called Hitler at noon to request reinforcements. He received the discouraging reply that the only available soldiers were the Volkssturm militia.

The young boys and older men duly marched out of Berlin the following

day. Meanwhile, the Germans persisted in their resistance. Any Soviet soldiers who got through the line were met by ambushes. At the village of Reichenberg, two SS battalions managed to defeat as many as 50 Soviet tanks. On the right flank, Private Kleint and his comrades defended Dolgelin tenaciously.

Kleint wrote in his diary how once battle was joined, there was no respite. The Soviets started with a barrage from the Katyusha batteries, and during fighting it became difficult to tell between friend and foe. A new wave of Soviet aircraft bombed the troops from above before the order came to withdraw.

Kleint braved the bombs and Soviet machine guns to make it to his old position, now outside the line of fire, unharmed. Against all odds, he had survived the bloody battle.

Hitler's last stand

"It is not I who have lost ... but the German people!"

Adolf Hitler to his officers in the Führerbunker on 22 April 1945.

Victory was costly

By 19th April, the German 9th Army was in retreat. The battle was lost. The roads were in chaos as tanks, trucks, infantrymen

and refugees scrambled westwards – away from the advancing Red Army. Amid the confusion, military police and SS soldiers began a manhunt for deserters, mercilessly shooting them or hanging them from roadside trees.

Five days later, the 9th Army found itself in the Spreewald Forest south-east of Berlin, surrounded by the Red Army. The soldiers had to fight their way west to surrender to US forces and avoid Soviet captivity, which few would survive. The breakout culminated in the Battle of Halbe, south of Berlin.

Around 60,000 of the 9th Army's remaining 210,000 men were killed in

Hitler had nervous breakdown once defeat was final

"It is not I who have lost the war, but the German people!" yelled a fuming Adolf Hitler during a meeting in the Führerbunker after he heard of the defeat at the Seelow Heights.

The news threw the dictator into a rage: "Then his face turned purple, his twitching left arm became quiet, and he could not put his left foot on the ground properly," an unnamed source told British intelligence after the war.

Hitler accused the army leadership of being incompetent and deceitful, and he believed that the German people deserved to "perish". After his outburst, Hitler slumped in his chair. The source believed he had suffered a nervous breakdown.

As defeat took shape, Hitler lost even more of his tenuous grasp on reality.

the battle, which lasted from 24th April to 1st May; 125,000 ended up in Soviet captivity, while 25,000 escaped. Among the lucky ones was Martin Kleint. He didn't have a single bullet left.

The Battle of Seelow Heights cost the Germans 12,000 men. Soviet casualties were much higher: some 30,000 Soviet soldiers died in the battle, but for Stalin the death toll meant little. Zhukov's victory was the main thing, and the marshal was richly rewarded for his efforts: he had the honour of receiving the Germans' declaration of surrender on 8th May, and later became the first commander of the Soviet occupation zone in Germany.

A few years later, however, Zhukov fell from grace. His war effort had made him more popular than Stalin himself, so the dictator dismissed him from his post in Berlin and sent him far away. Zhukov was to take up the post commanding the Odessa Military District.

FURTHER READING

• Tony Le Tissier: **Zhukov At the Oder – The Decisive Battle for Berlin**, Stackpole, 2009 • Antony Beevor: **Berlin – The Downfall: 1945**, Penguin, 2007

A month after the German surrender, Marshal Zhukov met with British Field Marshal Montgomery in Berlin.

Zhukov

Montgomery

**30th
APRIL**

Realising that all hope is lost, Adolf Hitler shoots himself in the Führerbunker.

**2nd
MAY**

The Red Army declares Berlin captured. Soldiers hoist the Soviet flag over the Reichstag.

**7th
MAY**

Colonel General Alfred Jodl signs the German Instrument of Surrender in Reims, France.

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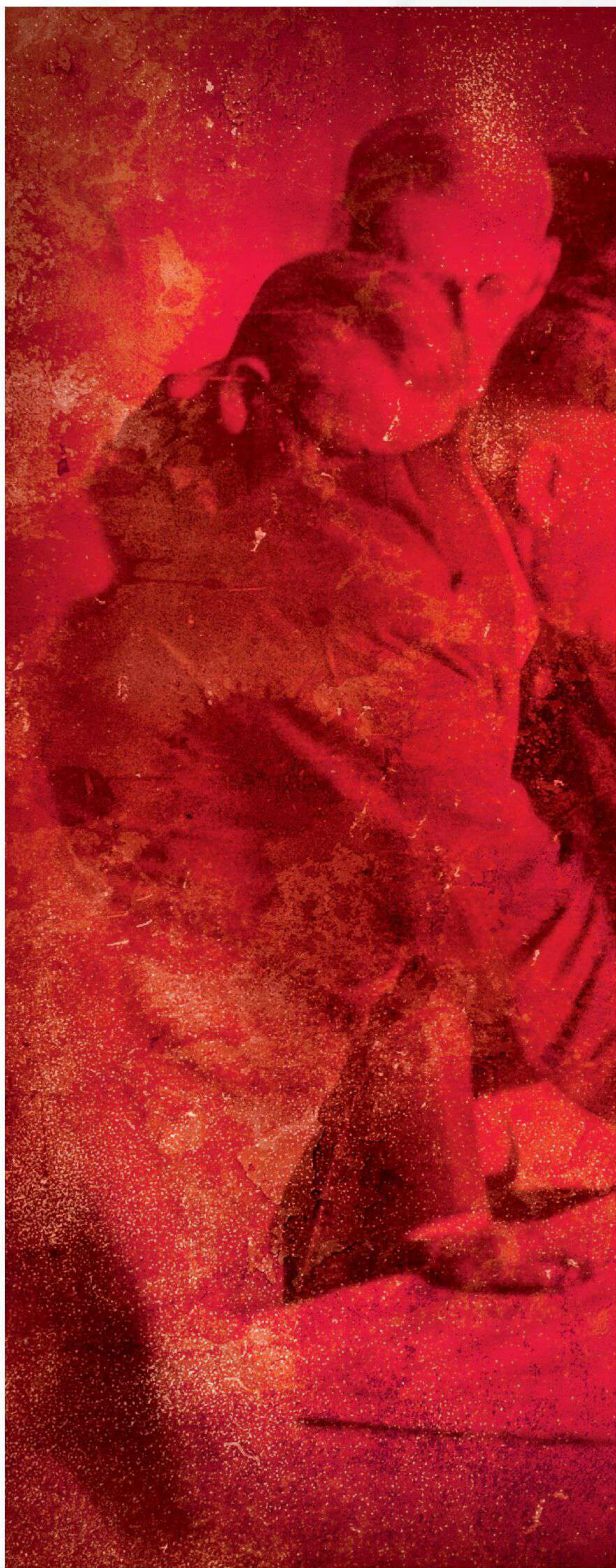
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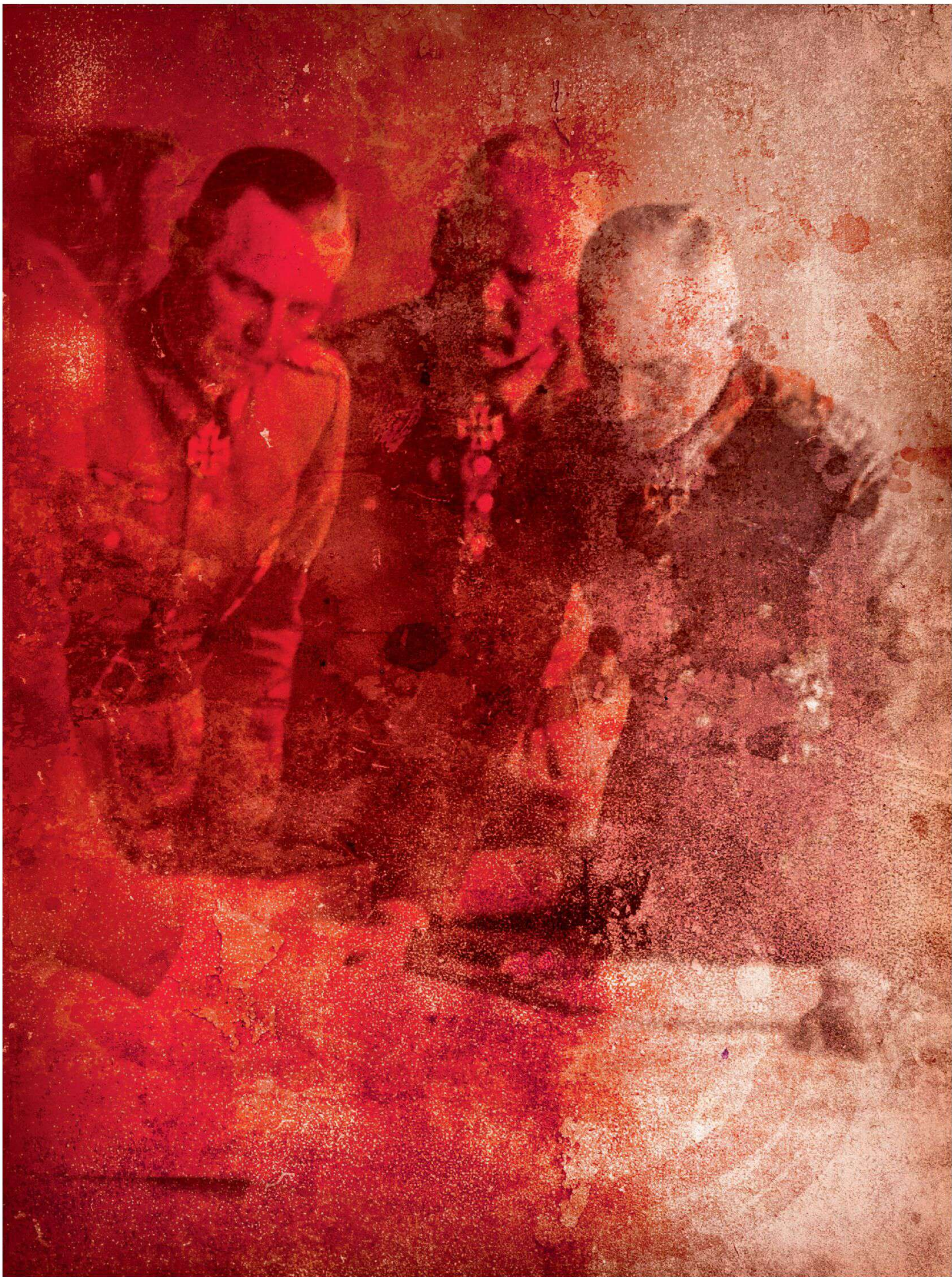
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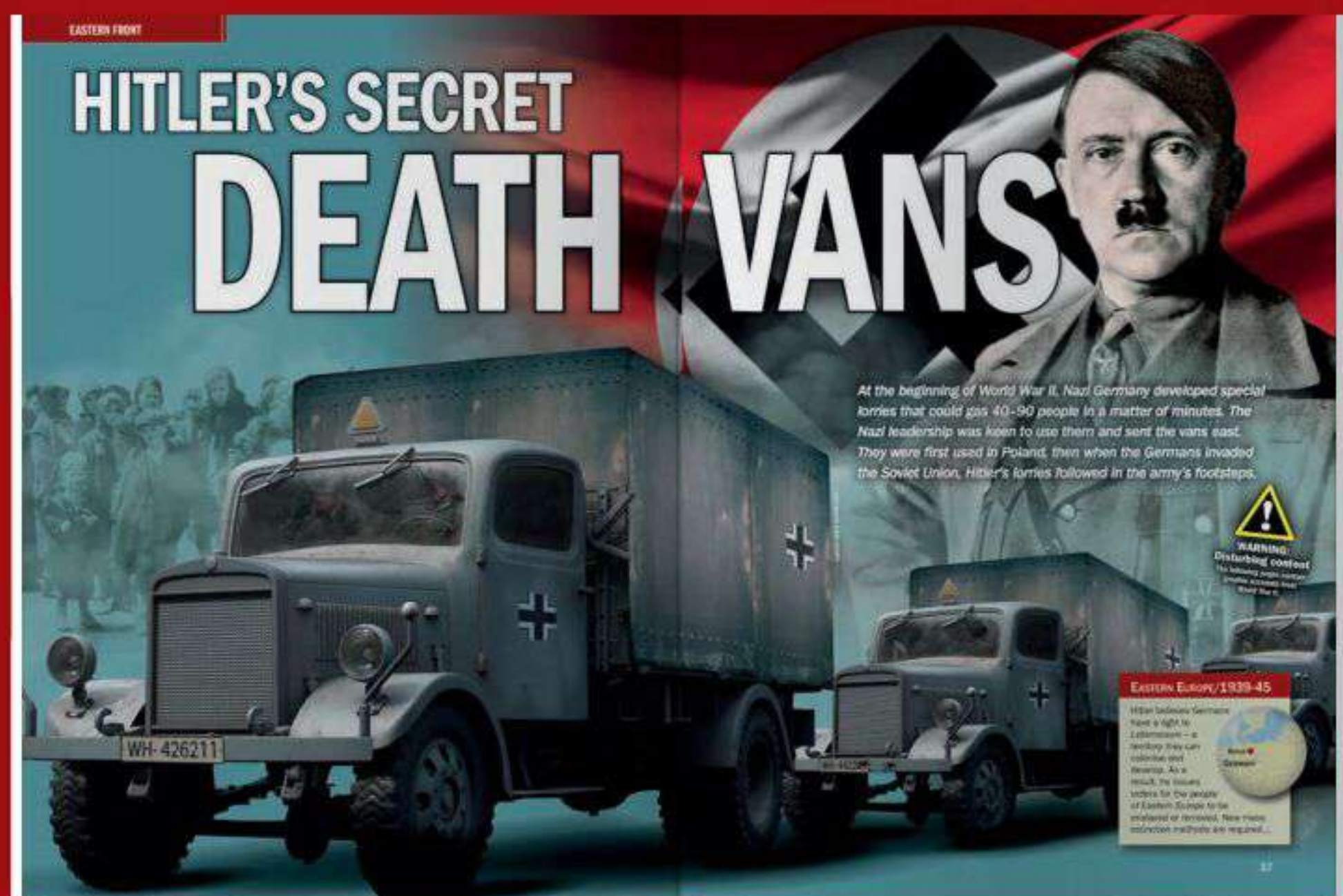
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WORLD WAR II'S BLOODIEST COMBAT ZONE

The war on the Eastern Front killed over 30 million people – more than all the other fronts combined. It was the scene of a bitter duel between two dictators that ended with the complete collapse of Hitler's Third Reich and the rise of the USSR as a military and industrial superpower. Join us to find out how and why it happened...



GAS CHAMBERS ON WHEELS

Deadly vans followed Nazi troops east, killing 'undesirables' as they went.



CONVOYS' DEADLY JOURNEY

U-boats picked off Allied cargo ships in Arctic Ocean as they sailed to Soviets' aid.



THE BATTLE OF KURSK

Thousands of tanks clashed in the biggest armoured battle in history.



BERLIN FACED RED ARMY

A small, battered German army delayed Stalin's army on the road to Berlin.